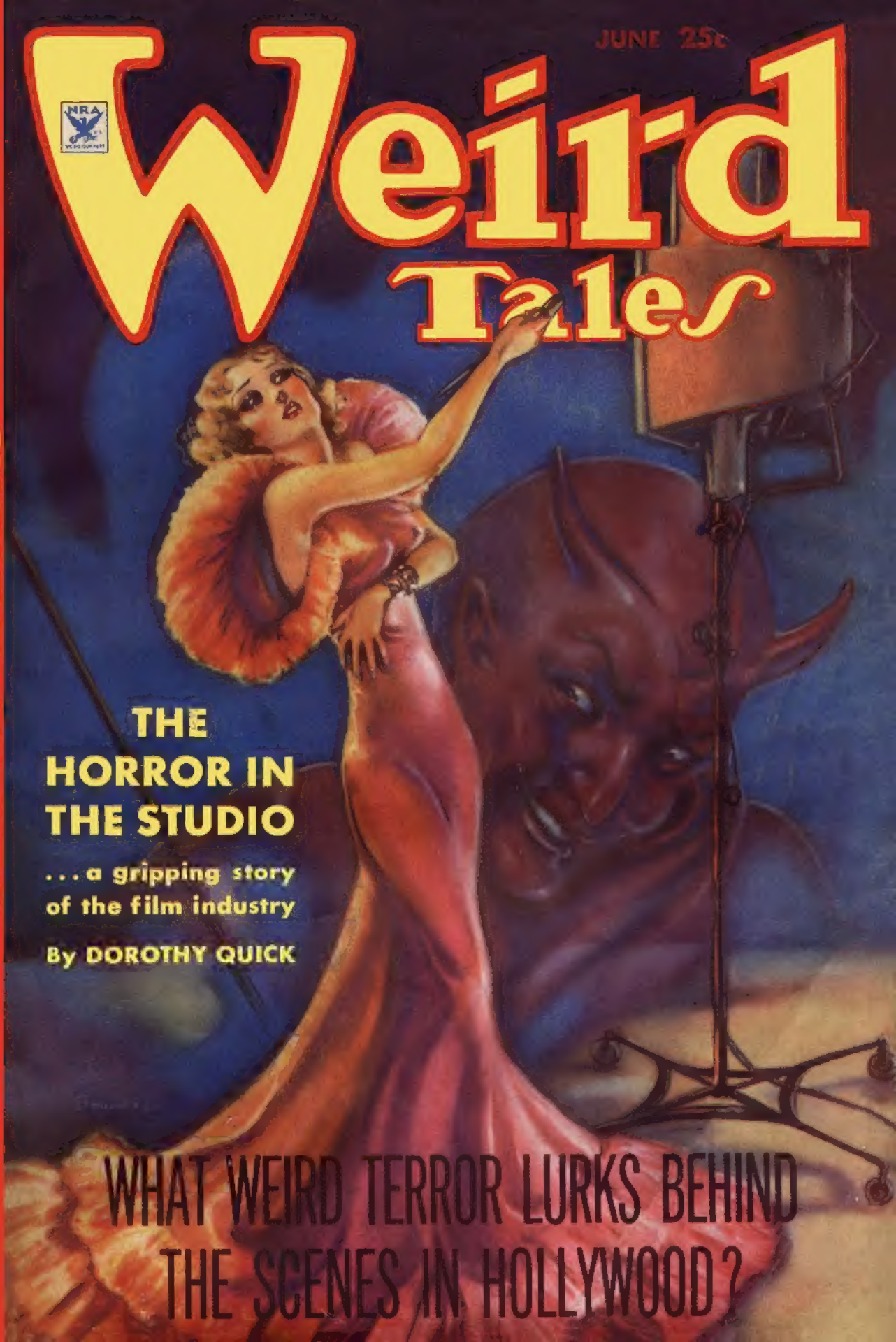
JUNE 25c

Weird Tales



THE HORROR IN THE STUDIO

. . . a gripping story of the film industry

By DOROTHY QUICK

WHAT WEIRD TERROR LURKS BEHIND THE SCENES IN HOLLYWOOD?

JUNE, 1935

WEIRD TALES

Printed in U.S.A.

Vol. 25, No. 6—25c

COMING NEXT MONTH

THE trail of vengeance led finally to a great new city in the northeast, called Babylon. On a spring evening Sthan and I, in the guise of two Hittite chiefs, passed across a bridge over the Euphrates, dotted with round boats of skins and reeds, and approached the thick walls of Babylon.

"Sthan, our quest draws to an end. I feel that those we seek are in this city," I said.

"Then we shall find them, master."

We passed through Babylon's brass gates into streets of big mud-brick buildings thronged by the dark Chaldeans. They were dressed in long white tunics of linen and wool and wore turbans over their long hair. To our left rose the brutal bulk of the Temple of Marduk, squat and square and mighty. Farther beyond it lay the flat, extensive palaces of the king.

I stopped a passer-by and asked him, "Friend, can you tell a stranger one thing? Who is reputed the most beautiful woman in Babylon?"

He stared disdainfully at my Hittite garb and said, "Only a stranger indeed could be ignorant that Tocris, the queen of our king Nabonidus, is the most beautiful woman in Babylon and the world."

"Sthan," I said, "the two we seek have become a king and queen. For well I know that this Nabonidus and Tocris must be Karnath and Etain, since Etain would ever choose for herself the most beautiful body she could find." . . .

This epic weird tale begins in ancient Atlantis and sweeps across the dusty centuries through Egypt, Babylon and Rome, up to our own time. You cannot afford to miss this thrilling novelette. It will be published complete in next month's WEIRD TALES:

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July Weird Tales . . . Out July 1

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Weird Tales

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

The Horror in the Studio

By DOROTHY QUICK

A dramatic weird story of Hollywood and a soul-blasting horror

I WAS in Hollywood two days before I got in touch with Bryant Holden. For weeks I had been trying to decide whether I should let him know that I had been engaged by Super Films to design costumes for their new feature, *The Devil's Gifts,* in which he was to be starred.

I did not quite know what to do. I didn't want to presume on a boy and girl romance that he had obviously forgotten. I was especially sensitive on the subject because *I* had *not* forgotten.

Eventually I wrote a note:

Dear Bryant,
Since we last met, I've become a designer, and the Super Films have engaged me to do unusual costumes for your new picture. It will be fun to see you again.

Lois.
(Now known as Dale Arden.)

I put down my address and sent the note off by the maid. If anyone had told me that very soon I would be plunged into a maelstrom of the weird and unnatural by that simple gesture, I would have scoffed in disbelief. It is indeed a mercy that the future is veiled for us.

About an hour after I had sent my letter, Bryant swept into the room like a tornado, and before I could get my breath I was in his arms. After one brief kiss, I pulled away. Heavenly as it was, I had to remember that for almost three years he hadn't deigned to know I existed.

"The old adage didn't work in our case," I laughed uncertainly, because I was so near to tears. "Absence didn't make the heart grow fonder."

Bryant looked like a small boy deprived of his toys.

"I'll be honest with you," he answered. "They put it in my contract that I couldn't marry for five years. I didn't have the nerve to write you that, and I wasn't strong enough to miss the chance for fame and fortune. I kept thinking I'd get back home to explain——"

He was so obviously distressed that I intervened. "I understand, Bryant. It's all right with me. We were friends before we were sweethearts. Let's go back to that."

Bryant took my hands in his. "I want you to know that I haven't stopped caring—that there's no one else."

I felt that we were getting too serious. To break the tension I said, "I want to hear all about the new picture."

We sat down on the couch, and Bryant's arm slid around my shoulder. Three years of misery vanished—life stretched ahead like a shining pathway.

But it was at that moment that the terrible thing that was coming reared its head.

"I DON'T like it," Bryant said, and I was astonished by his vehemence. "I've done everything I could to get out of it, but I've had no luck. If I break my contract there's a tremendous fine which I couldn't meet, to say nothing of all the lawsuits that would follow."

"What's the matter with the picture?" I asked, still smiling—God pity me!

"I hate it! It's horrible! Ugh! One

"The moment came for Giulio to strike the death blow."

of the scenario writers unearthed an old manuscript with a plot that out-horrored the horrors! I read it once and I still dream about it. When they told me I was to play it I flatly refused. I said it would ruin my future as a leading man. They flung John Barrymore and Fredric March in my face as having survived *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* with added popularity."

"Surely nothing could be worse than that!"

Bryant's face clouded. "I hate talking about it, even, but that's silly, when I've got to play it." He shrugged slightly. "The manuscript was the diary of a Florentine named Giulio, written centuries ago—just a few odd pages tucked in the back of an ancient vellum book. He was one of the favorites of Lorenzo de' Medici, and he sold his soul to the devil for wealth, youth and all the fleshpots of life. Then, as the years went by, he became frightened of his bargain and bought his soul back from the devil. The price he paid was that he must give the devil five souls for his—so that he could retain all the devil's gifts.

"The Devil's Gifts! That was the name of the picture. A grand title, I thought.

"Giulio begins by corrupting the mind of his mistress until her soul is lost. Then he takes a lovely girl, betrays her and leads her so far down the way of debauchery and sin that her soul is the second. Next is a young boy whose entire life he undermines to pay his debt. So it goes, until he has brought five people to the devil's level, and all the while he becomes more and more loathsome himself —not in looks, for he never ages, but he is evil personified—his machinations, his lies, his evil nature take shape within him and he becomes a mass of crawling sin. He gets his soul back from the devil but he is so evil that there is no place for him. God will not receive him and the devil has relinquished all rights to his soul. He can not die and he can not live. He becomes a monster, tortured by his past deeds, yet ever doing more in the hope that the devil will relent and let him come to him.

"Finally he meets a girl whose goodness is stronger than his vileness. She loves him, not knowing the evil creature that he is, and though he tries to seduce her, her love and purity save her from his wiles. He repents and turns his thoughts away from evil, and the devil's gifts lose their power. He becomes an old, old man, unspeakably senile, and dies at her feet.

"There is a suggestion of his redemption at the very end. It's a terrible picture—a terrible man. The ending is of *course a studio one—the manuscript stops* where he is an outcast from heaven and hell and, tortured by his life, is going mad. I suppose it's foolish, but I feel that something awful will happen. The manuscript alone has such a force of evil that it seems to squirm in your hands.

"It all sounds pretty grim, I must admit, but I can see the studio's point—after all, he's a sort of Don Juan.

"He tortures women. Gilles de Retz and the Marquis de Sade were infants compared to him. Oh, well"—Bryant shrugged—"what must be—must. See that you design me gorgeous costumes, and just having you there will help keep me sane."

I thanked him prettily for the compliment and had no idea at the time how prophetic his words actually were.

When I read the script I understood better how he felt. There *was* a compelling power of evil emanating from the typewritten pages. If I could feel it so strongly in the script the studio had made, what must the actual manuscript have been! Bryant had told the story sketchily. He had left out the culminating horrors of the delivering of the five souls to the devil. Giulio was far worse than Bryant had painted him—a creature so depraved, so sunk in the morass of sin that one hated him long before the first episode was finished.

It was a magnificent part. It was also an extremely difficult one, for beyond the chiseled profile and the flashing smile of the always handsome young man, there must inevitably be the suggestion of evil. I thought how far Bryant had grown away from the boy I had known, to be able to portray it, and I wondered if he would put it over.

The days slipped away quickly, and I had never been happier. Bryant was devoted to me. We went to openings and *had our pictures taken together*, we lunched at the Brown Derby, we dined at the Coconut Grove, and went swimming on Malibu beach. I was swept into the glittering world of stardom and I loved every minute of it. Between times, lovely rich materials were assembled for me, and I created what the studio called "masterpieces."

I was afraid once my sketches were O.K.ed, my job would be over, but great-

ly to my relief I was told I must be on the set every day in case there might be changes or readjustments of the costumes.

The first day I went, it would have been hard to tell who was the more nervous, Bryant or I. I made my advent timidly, for I wasn't quite sure what my status would be, but Bryant came forward and ushered me to a chair marked with my name. It gave me such a sense of importance that for a minute I did not quite take in Bryant's magnificence. Then I exclaimed.

"Bryant, you're wonderful! You're not Bryant Holden at all. You're one of the Medici court come back."

Even under his make-up he paled. "Don't say that. It's spooky enough the way I feel in these things without your noticing it."

I looked at him. If an old portrait could have stepped down from its frame, its ancient figure could not have been more perfect than Bryant. His hair, which had been allowed to grow long for the part, waved back from his face, and fell gracefully. The long-sleeved surcoat shaped its red velvet lines to his figure and the mink fur outlined the classic contour of his neck. The pale rose silken tights clung to his straight legs, until he had all the chiseled grace of a statue. The costume was a credit to me, but the way Bryant wore it was magnificently his own.

Just then the director signaled and the glass doors which enclosed the set were shut. Bryant pressed my hand and walked over to the stage.

From a far corner came a lovely slender figure, the Fiammetta of the picture. Though I happened to know that Glade Sylvan, who was playing the part, possessed quite the worst reputation in Hollywood, I was struck by the sweetness of her face. In spite of her many lovers, she had a startled look of perpetual innocence that was truly amazing. The long, flowing gown of blue made her look absurdly young, and the golden curls escaping from the heavy mesh that bound her forehead only added to the youthful effect—Giulio's first victim!

They were not beginning with the opening scene of the picture, because Glade Sylvan had an important part waiting for her in another production, and so the sequences that she was appearing in were to be shot first so that she could be loaned out.

"We'll just run through the lines first with business. Do it your own way," the director, Carl Van Wagen, said.

It was the scene in which Giulio seduces Fiammetta. He has gained admittance to her father's house disguised as a music teacher. Glade was so innocent and sweet and Bryant so fascinating and boyish that it seemed a charming summer idyl.

But when Fiammetta, after agreeing to a midnight rendezvous, made a sweeping curtsy to Giulio and left the tapestry-hung hall, an evil expression stole over Bryant's face. So evil was it, that, sitting in my chair, I shuddered.

They went through the scene three times before the director said they were ready to "shoot".

There were several minor changes and bits of action interpolated. Each time he did it, the expression of evil on Bryant's face deepened and each time the director said "Great work!" to him.

Finally they took the scene. It went off perfectly. At the end of it, they took a close-up of Bryant watching Fiammetta leave.

It was still early, so the director gave Glade twenty minutes to change her dress, while the rest of us moved over to the other set, Fiammetta's bedroom.

Bryant was very quiet. He stood a

little to one side, with a strained expression on his face. I went over to him and told him how marvelous I thought his acting had been. His reply was abstracted, unenthusiastic.

Before I had a chance to say anything else, Glade Sylvan appeared. She wore a long, white robe, which, despite the yards and yards of material that had gone into it, managed to cling to every line of her perfect figure, revealing each lush, rounded curve. Her golden curls were unbound now, and she looked younger and more innocent than ever.

They went through the lines. It was a beautifully written scene—the Marguerite idyl. It ended with Glade closely clasped in Bryant's arms, his lips on hers, while from behind the hangings of the bed leered the devil's face triumphant.

After they had gone through the scene once, I heard Glade say to Bryant, "It isn't necessary to put quite so much passion into a rehearsal."

A leer passed over Bryant's face, unlike any expression of his I had ever seen. He made no reply. At the time I wondered—but the moment passed.

The scene finally taken, time off for lunch was announced. As Glade and Bryant passed me on their way off the set, I heard her say, "And I thought you were such a nice boy."

He put his arm around her and I couldn't help seeing that his fingers touched the curve of her breast. "You won't quite know how 'nice' I am until——" His voice died down as he whispered in her ear.

She looked up at him, and I could see the sudden awakening of interest in her eyes. I remembered the lovers she had been credited with and I was afraid. A pang shot through me that I had to admit was jealousy—raised to the nth degree.

They left the set together, and later I saw them at a tiny table in the lunchroom.

That afternoon they did the part where Fiammetta, frantic over her lost innocence, desperate with the knowledge of her unborn child, pleads with Giulio to right the wrong he has done her by making her his wife; and when he refuses, kills herself while he watches, laughing.

It was a great scene. Both Glade and Bryant excelled themselves. When it was over, the director called out to Bryant, "If you keep up this tempo, this picture's going to be a classic. It's almost as though you were Giulio—you're so good."

Almost as though he were Giulio!

I remembered Bryant's feeling when he read the manuscript. I remembered the way he wore the unaccustomed clothes, the leer on his face, the passion Glade Sylvan had objected to at first and been intrigued by afterward. I remembered all these things, and in spite of the warmth of the studio I shivered as I felt icy fingers clutching at my heart.

"It's almost as though you were Giulio."

I was suddenly afraid.

My fears were justified. Bryant plunged into a mad affair with Glade Sylvan, which promptly became the talk of Hollywood. Always before, Glade had been the dominating factor in her affairs, the one sought. But now her infatuation for Bryant had altered all precedent, and after a little, she was the one who pursued. She hung on his every word, sheer passion for him was written on every move she made. At first Bryant responded; then as her ardor deepened, his lessened, until his indifference became as much cause for gossip as the scandal had made in the beginning.

During all this time I saw very little of Bryant, and when I did, he was strangely unlike himself. Our dinners and

drives suddenly ceased. For very pride, I couldn't force myself upon him. In the studio he was always in costume and seemed more and more like the character he was portraying.

Rumor reached me that he and Glade wore their costumes away from the studio. "My Florentine lover" was reputed to be her name for him. I was miserably unhappy because the man I loved had drifted from me a second time.

Finally the day came when the last sequence in which Glade appeared was to be taken—her last in reality, her first in the picture; the ballroom scene in which Giulio for the first time sees Fiammetta.

The ballroom was perfectly reproduced from the one in the Strozzi palace. Filled with gay, laughing people in the Florentine costumes I had designed, it was stupendous. Bryant looked like a Greek god. He was so magnificent in his white silks and satin edged with sable, that my heart cried out to him.

He passed near me. I conquered my pride. After all, it was better to seem casual. "Hello, Bryant," I called.

He wheeled and a puzzled look came into his eyes. "Bryant—she called me Bryant—not Giulio."

I knew what he meant. The director, the actors, everyone in the studio had been calling him Giulio! Fear swept over me, fear of some unknown terrible evil.

"Bryant," I said again, and put my hand on his arm, "Bryant, why don't you come to see me any more?" My fear for him had conquered the pride that had possessed me. I made up my mind I would fight Glade for the man I loved, and save him somehow from the evil that menaced him.

A subtle change came over him. He shook himself very much as a dog coming out of water might do.

"Lois, dear little Lois," he breathed; then the old boyish grin gleamed out from his face. "How about a ride tonight—out in the moonlight, just you and me?"

"O.K." I grinned back, deciding swiftly that sitting back waiting for men is all a mistake.

"I'll come for you at eight," he said, just as the director called, "Places".

I shall never forget the scene. The music, the stately old dances, Lorenzo de' Medici honoring his subjects by sharing their pleasures and through it all Bryant's white satin moving, a constant focus for my eyes.

I was not the only one watching him. Glade Sylvan was intent upon him, too, and a deep furrow appeared between her eyes, for Bryant was obviously making love to a lovely red-haired girl—one of the extras. . . .

Finally Glade could stand it no longer. She made her way back of the dancers who were going through the ballet, and finding Bryant, linked her arm in his. As chance would have it, she drew him behind a pillar, near enough to where I sat for me to hear what they said.

"Giulio, my Florentine lover, I can't stand you looking at that girl like that. Can't you see you torture me every time you touch her?" There was real agony in Glade's voice.

I could see Bryant's face. It was evil, as evil as it had been in the close-up that first day.

"You little fool," he sneered, "can't you see when a man's tired of you? You might as well know we're through."

"No—no—you can't mean it." Glade was pleading.

"I do." Bryant pushed her clinging hands away, brutally thrust her from him against the pillar and walked rapidly in the direction of the red-haired girl.

Now I could see Glade Sylvan's face. She dared not weep for fear of disturbing her make-up. The trouper instinct of

not spoiling the picture was strong, but she was suffering silently in a way that I hope never to have to see again. Glade Sylvan, the desired of all men, had been discarded. She had recognized as well as I the finality in Bryant's voice.

She caught my eye and moved toward me. "I took him from you," she said slowly, almost as though she spoke without volition. "That is, I thought I did. I know better now. I never had him. There's something about him——" A swift shudder swept over her, she put her hand on mine. "He's not human—even when I've been in his arms I've known it. I've been afraid. But no matter what he was, I loved him; no matter what he asked for, I gave."

"Hush!" I tried to stop her. I knew she'd hate herself afterward for telling me these things.

"It did no good. He's worse than the man in the picture, he's an inhuman monster that——" She paused, then whispered, "For God's sake don't fall into his spell."

For one instant, her horror-stricken eyes looked into mine; then before I could speak the angry words that trembled on my lips, she was gone.

Afterward I was glad that they had never been said, for less than an hour later, I was standing beside Glade Sylvan's lifeless body.

THE director, suddenly needing an extra, asked me if I would like to be in the picture. Of course I jumped at the chance. So I, too, wore a costume, which the mirror had told me was not unbecoming.

The director had assigned me to a place very near Bryant and Glade. The last "take" was a close-up of Giulio bowing low over Fiammetta's hand. The rest of the scene had already been shot. The extras were left in for background, so I stood directly behind Glade.

"Farewell, my lord," Glade's mellow voice spoke Fiammetta's lines.

"Good night, but not farewell. We meet again." Bryant's tones were honey-sweet.

A man came forward to hold a card with the number of the scene on it, before the camera. "I love you," Glade whispered to Bryant so low that I could only just hear.

"Fool!" Bryant sneered.

"It's all over?"

"Must I tell you again?" This time Bryant's voice was louder, and the girl next me caught his words. I felt her lean forward.

The whole studio heard the rest. Glade cried in a high-pitched, hysterical voice, "Then I don't want to live!" She snatched the dagger from Bryant's belt and stabbed it into her heart.

Everyone watched Glade fall, but I looked at Bryant, and saw an expression of evil gloating on his features. Only for a second. It was as though an evil mask were being held over his face; then, as a woman screamed, it died away, the color drained from his cheeks and he staggered uncertainly.

Eventually I got him away from the set, into his dressing-room and the hands of his man. By the time he had been gotten into his ordinary clothes, I too had changed, and together we walked to his car. Bryant seemed in a daze.

I brought him back to my bungalow, made him lie down on the sofa while I got supper. He fell into a deep sleep almost immediately.

I LEFT him alone, and it was long past ten o'clock when he finally stirred. Before he had a chance to talk, I gave him coffee and sandwiches. Then as I saw that the color had come back into

his face and he looked more like the old Bryant, I stopped the chatter I had been flinging into the conversation.

"Tell me what happened," he said.

"Don't you remember?"

"I remember Glade Sylvan killed herself. But why?"

I gasped. "Do you mean to tell me you don't know?"

Bryant shook his head. His eyes were puzzled.

"You don't remember what she said to you on the set? What you said to her?" I persisted.

"Good heaven, Lois, why would I lie to you? I don't remember much of anything that's gone on since the day we started the picture. I remember my part, of course, but other than that I don't seem to recall what I've done in between. Haven't we been together?"

His expression was strained as though he was trying hard to bring back the week that had passed. My nerves snapped.

"You've been Glade Sylvan's lover and she killed herself because you told her you were through."

"My God!" cried Bryant. He took my hands in his and held them over his heart. "I swear by all I hold holy that I love you and that to my knowledge I've never been untrue to you." His eyes, clear and honest, looked into mine.

"I believe you——" I whispered because emotion was choking my throat. "I believe you, even though I heard you tell Glade you were finished."

"That wasn't I. Don't you see, Lois? —that was Giulio!"

I caught my breath as the magnitude of what he was saying penetrated my consciousness. Unhesitatingly I knew it was true, even before he went on explaining.

"I told you when I first read that manuscript that something strange happened to me. I believe it was Giulio—come back to do more work for his master, and he's doing it through me—taking my body for his own."

I knew now why I had been afraid, why Bryant hadn't noticed me. Giulio would naturally keep Bryant away from me, for I alone, apparently, had the power to drive Giulio out and bring Bryant back. I had done it for a minute this afternoon, I was doing it for a longer time now, and I would go on doing it.

"You can save me, Lois." Bryant put my thoughts into words. "He won't get back if you are with me; otherwise I'm afraid he'll push me so far out that I'll never be myself again. Promise you won't let that happen—that you'll stay with me." He clung to me; there was fear in his voice.

I gathered him into my arms and pressed his head against my breast. "I'll never leave you."

I could feel him trembling as I held him. I soothed him gently as a mother might have done a little boy afraid of the dark. Suddenly he cried, "Glade—I'm responsible for her death!" He began to sob.

"Hush, my darling, hush. You're not responsible for anything—that was Giulio."

As I said the name, the strangest feeling took possession of me. I had the impression that something evil was trying to beat down the barrier of my will. I felt that I was a shield before him, like a window some obscene and terrible thing was trying to come through.

The next morning Bryant and I went to the highest official of the company. But it was no use. They absolutely refused to release Bryant from his contract or the part. They did, however, grant a holiday for Glade Sylvan's funeral, so we had three days in which to forget.

They were glorious. We went to Malibu and lay in the sunshine. I thought it

strange that Bryant made no attempt to kiss me. He would sit hours with my hand in his or resting his head upon my lap. Once when I started to kiss him, he drew back.

"Not yet. Giulio likes that sort of thing too much. I'm afraid he'll get back." His eyes were deep-shadowed.

"Out here in the sunshine it all seems fantastic," I exclaimed.

"I always feel that he's waiting for a moment when the bars are let down, that he may slip in. When the picture is over, and all that Florentine atmosphere which puts me in a receptive mood is gone, then we'll go away and I'll feel safe. But now I'm afraid." Bryant's face was grave.

I remembered the feeling that I had had, of a nameless obscenity trying to get at him through me, and was silent.

When they recommenced work on the picture, I was more frightened than ever for Bryant. To be sure, I was near him, calling him by his right name, having already seen that the studio followed my example; but even with all this, I could see that Bryant was feeling the strain. There were moments when I could catch a glint of Giulio in his eyes.

They were doing a banquet scene where Giulio begins the conquest of another girl, Ginevra. It was laid in one end of the large hall, near the spot where Glade Sylvan had killed herself. The long, narrow table looked like a scene from *The Jest,* on a larger scale.

In the midst of the people taking their places, I was called to adjust Ginevra's costume, the lines of which did not quite suit her. It meant a little draping; so we had to go to her dressing-room, and it was fully twenty minutes before I got back to the set.

When I returned I was horrified to see Bryant bending ardently over the red-haired girl. One glance and I knew what had happened.

Giulio was in control. He had overcome Bryant's will during the little time I had been gone.

I started toward him to try and bring back the spirit of the man I loved, but just then the director called "Lights—places," and I knew it was hopeless. I saw Bryant whisper something in the red-haired girl's ear before he left her.

THERE was nothing to do but wait. The scene went on. Giulio wove his net about Ginevra and at the same time picked a quarrel with the noble who, in the story, was her betrothed. The action called for a duel with daggers between the two, and when the scene was being taken and Bryant was advancing toward the man, dagger upraised, the lust to kill was shining from his eyes. I was afraid.

The noble "Howard Parker" sensed something strange, too, and when the moment came for Giulio to strike the death blow, which of course for the picture would be faked and was not supposed to be carried out beyond the first downward thrust, Howard was lying on the floor. As the dagger started downward, he rolled quickly to one side. There was a low gasp as the steel blade was driven into the wooden floor by the force of Bryant's arm. If Howard Parker had not moved, Bryant would have been a murderer!

Bryant recovered himself quickly. "I lost my balance. Thank God you moved, old chap!"

There was nothing for Howard to do but accept the explanation with as good grace as possible, but I knew from his expression that he did not believe it.

When work was over for the day Bryant disappeared before I could get to him. The red-haired girl was not to be seen, either.

I waited until the confusion of the final details of the scene was settled, then

went to the director. "It's vitally necessary that I talk to you alone at once," I told him.

He was a kindly man, and he must have seen the terror in my eyes, for he swept aside everyone and everything and led me to the deserted set of Fiammetta's bedroom.

"Now, my dear, what can I do for you?" he began.

I launched into the story. I kept nothing back, not even my school-girl romance.

Surprize, incredulity and astonishment struggled for possession of his rugged features. "You believe that this Giulio meant to kill Howard?"

"I do. Just as I believe he intends to seduce that red-haired extra girl."

"You think Bryant himself is innocent of all this? There have been people with dual personalities, you know, and Bryant may have a Mr. Hyde in his own nature."

"It couldn't be that. There was no sign of anything of the sort until this picture started. Bryant himself knows nothing of what goes on when Giulio is in control. He feels him trying to gain possession, but once Giulio has been successful, everything as far as Bryant is concerned is a blank." I could see the director watching me narrowly. "Besides, I too have felt that evil force trying to reach Bryant through me."

" 'There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamed of in your philosophy,' " he quoted. "I have delved a bit into the occult. Perhaps I can help——"

"The picture must be stopped."

"I haven't authority for that. The company would laugh at all this, but I can arrange that you will be near him on the set as an extra in each scene." He paused suddenly. "We'd better get to Bryant. The more Giulio is in control the more strength he will gather, and the harder it will be to drive him out."

We started to walk across the lot toward the row of dressing-rooms which were in actuality little houses set in a row, but each one separate in itself. Bryant's was at the end. As we neared it, we heard a scream. We started to run, but before we could reach the door, it was flung open and the red-haired girl came running out. She was dead-white and half hysterical.

The director caught her by the arm. "What has happened?"

We both saw that her neck was marked with great, red, ugly bruises, and that she was clutching her dress together over her shoulder where it had been torn.

"The man is a fiend!" she gasped. "He's not human! I got away in time, but——" She slumped into the director's outstretched arms.

He picked her up. "Go ahead." He indicated Bryant's room. "I'll take care of her—see that she doesn't talk——"

The door was open. I went in. Bryant was sitting with his back to me, facing a huge mirror, and the reflection that gazed back was a horrible, lustful thing.

"Bryant!" I called. "Bryant!"

The look of sheer desire died away. His face became as blank as though the evil that had been upon it had been wiped off with a sponge. In its stead was an utter blankness.

"Bryant, darling," I whispered, and held him close.

A tremor shook his body, then a series of convulsions. Finally he fell forward on the dressing-room table in a stupor.

"He did that before. He'll sleep now. When he wakes up he'll be Bryant again," I told the director, as he came in.

"Then we'll send his man to watch him. You can be called as soon as he wakes."

The director picked up the phone and said to send Bryant's valet over at once. When the man arrived, the director took me to his private office and made me sit down in a deep, cushioned leather chair, Then he opened a drawer and took out an ancient manuscript.

As he laid it on his desk, he said gently, "Here is the root of the trouble. I don't know a great deal about such things, but I have read a little on the subject. I feel sure that the spirit of Giulio is bound up with this, that this innocent-looking document opens the way for him to return to earth."

"As though it were a path from the unknown," I interjected.

"Precisely. Of course, with our reproduction of the past, we've made it easier for him to gain control of Bryant. If it hadn't been for Bryant's love for you, there is no doubt Giulio would have completely dominated Bryant by now, and we might never have been able to drive him out. As it is, I think if you could burn the manuscript at a time *when Bryant is himself*, you would send Giulio back to the infernal regions where he belongs."

"Mr. Van Wagen, you're wonderful. I'm sure you've hit it and we'll save Bryant." I felt new life flowing into me.

"I'm taking the responsibility of giving you this," he handed me the manuscript, "in spite of its value as an antique. But remember, you must only burn it when *you are sure Bryant is himself*. If Giulio were in possession, you would destroy Bryant for ever, I believe."

The enormity of what I was taking on my shoulders struck me fully "You mean——" I gasped.

"Just what I say. It would mean the destruction of Giulio's spirit, and as he would be in command of Bryant's body, the body would die and Bryant's soul would wander homeless about the earth. Be very sure it is Bryant himself, before you consign the manuscript to the flames."

"I will," I promised solemnly. "I can't thank you enough. There aren't words enough in the world."

"I may be wrong. It may not work, but I think and hope it will."

I put the manuscript in my handbag, which, being one of those large, flat envelope purses, had room enough to hold it easily. I shook hands with the director. He touched my cheek gently and said, "Good luck, little Saint George!"

I left him as fully determined to slay the dragon as ever the saint he had likened me to could have been, when he rode forth with his gleaming sword.

BRYANT was very quiet when I sat by his side in the blue roadster. Apparently he remembered nothing of what had happened, and I did not try to enlighten him.

Once when we were waiting for a light, Bryant leaned toward me. "You're beautiful," he said.

"I'm glad you think so," I laughed as the car shot forward again.

"I wish I could tell you all my thoughts." There was a quality in his voice I had never heard before as he plunged into a dissertation on how lovely he thought me, and I enjoyed so much hearing him extol my charms that I never even noticed where we were going, until the car stopped in front of Bryant's house.

"I wanted to pick up something I'd forgotten before we go to dinner," he said matter-of-factly. "Won't you come in?"

Without giving me time to answer, he jumped out and held the car door open for me. I followed and watched him insert his key into the lock of the iron-grilled door.

"The servants have a night off," he explained.

We went in together.

"Wait for me here," he suggested, showing me into the living-room. "I won't be a second."

I went over to the fireplace. Although it was warm and summery outside, the fire was laid, ready for burning. "Atmosphere," I thought, and then was grateful, because here was just what I needed. I would burn the manuscript and be finished with the horror of the studio for ever.

I got some matches from a smoking-stand and started the fire. "I will wait until it is burning brightly," I thought, "before I throw in the manuscript. I must take no chances."

It was well I did so, for as I stood there opening my bag to have the manuscript ready, I heard a noise behind me and turned to see what it was. Bryant stood there—but I knew instantly it was not Bryant, for he wore Giulio's costume and it was Giulio's rapacious look that gleamed forth from his face.

I remembered the tales I had heard of Bryant and Glade dressing up for their love-making. I remembered the director's words about being sure it was not Giulio, when I burned the manuscript.

As he advanced toward me, I shut my bag and slipped it behind the cushion of a near-by chair. I was sure he was too intent on my face to even notice what my hands were doing.

"Bryant, Bryant darling," I called—I had brought him back that way before. Now my voice seemed to make no impression on him. He caught me in his arms and crushed his lips against mine.

It was the most terrible experience. I was being kissed by Bryant, but he was only the shell of the man I loved. His real self was—God alone knew where—and it was Giulio, evil and obscene, whose kisses were being branded upon my soul.

I knew this, and yet despite my knowledge and my horror, it was arousing a response in me. I loved Bryant, I wanted to be his, but not this way, not as a plaything for Giulio. I must bring Bryant back, for his sake and my own.

"Bryant, Bryant—can't you see it's Lois, Lois who loves you?"

The thing that was within Bryant laughed and caught me up in his arms and carried me through the living-room to a room I had never seen before. It was hung with tapestries and in the center was a high-carved bed.

"Bryant," I pleaded frantically, for I knew that unless I could bring him back quickly, there would be no use. "Bryant, don't you remember Lois, how we used to walk home from school together, how you loved me? Don't you remember—we are going to be married?"

Giulio, with Bryant's mouth, laughed again, as he put me on my feet. "These ugly things, we must get rid of them," he cried and pulled off my hat and tossed it far into the corner of the room. He ran his fingers through my curls and then they traveled downward to the neck of my dress.

I remembered the red-haired girl's bruised neck and her torn dress. "Bryant," I screamed, "you wouldn't hurt Lois?"

For an instant his eyes changed. Hope surged within me, but it was only for an instant.

"You little fool," Bryant's voice, subtly tinged with all of Giulio's venom, snarled in my ear, "you are going to pay for all the trouble you have caused me; you were almost strong enough to drive me away—you kept me out three days, but in the end I fooled you. I pretended I had gone. But I didn't go and I won't go. You are my only danger. After tonight you will be so much mine that the

weak thing you call 'Bryant' will never come back and I—Giulio—shall for at least this body's term of years, have a home on earth."

Frantically I tried to get away from him. Overwhelming horror beat upon my brain. The awfulness of my situation was unthinkable. It was not only myself that was at stake, but Bryant's soul as well. Once this incarnate evil had made good his threats, I knew Bryant would be utterly lost.

Holding me firmly by the wrist with his left hand, he tore at my dress with his right.

Silently I began to pray, "Dear God, don't let it happen. Don't let this awful creature dominate me——

"Our Father who art in heaven . . ."

I shut my eyes to avoid the terrible eyes that seemed to be gaining control of mine.

"Hallowed be Thy name . . ."

Surely his fingers were less firm, less steady? I went on praying:

"On earth as it is in heaven."

"What are you doing?" The snarling voice tried to pierce through my thoughts. "Stop fighting me!"

Hope was reborn. Prayer had power. Good could conquer evil. I kept my eyes shut and went on, only now I spoke the words instead of thinking them:

"Thy will be done on earth . . ."

The fingers traveled upward to my neck. "I will kill you!" the voice cried, and then I felt his lips pressed to mine, choking back the words.

My thoughts kept on with my prayers. Over and over I said the words in my mind. With obscene kisses on my mouth and unclean fingers pressing into my throat, I went on, until finally my lips were free and all the force was focused on my throat.

I was gasping now, scarcely able to breathe, and I could hardly keep my thoughts concentrated, with evil throwing all its strength against me. But somehow I managed to keep on praying. Through a mist of blackness in which there were things too unspeakable to name, I forced the words through my tortured brain:

"Our—Father—who art . . ."

The pressure on my throat slackened.

"in — heaven — hallowed — be — Thy name . . ."

I could hardly feel the fingers, their touch was so light.

"Thy kingdom come—Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven—Give us this day . . ."

I heard a thud such as a heavy body falling to the floor might make.

I kept on repeating the words of the Lord's Prayer over and over, out loud as my gasping breath came back to me. After a while I ventured to open my eyes.

Bryant's body was lying on the floor; his breath came and went evenly. To all appearances he was asleep.

I was afraid of a trick, so I kept on praying. Faith had saved me; it would save Bryant, but I dared not let down its bars.

All night I stayed there in that tapestry-hung room, in the shadow of the carved bed, stayed on the floor by Bryant's side repeating all the prayers I had ever known, reciting the creed and making the sign of the cross over Bryant again and again, on and on through the night. I dared not stop, although my voice became no more than a whisper and my throat was an aching fire.

The first rays of the early sun were in the sky when Bryant opened his eyes. The last words of prayer on my lips died away into a silent thanksgiving for the miracle that had been wrought, for it was Bryant whose eyes looked questioningly into mine.

"What's happened?" he asked, as he struggled to his feet. Then he saw my torn dress and took in the significance of my disheveled condition. "My God—what have I done?"

He pulled me up.

"If I've hurt you, Lois, I'll kill myself!" he said, and I knew without doubt it really was Bryant that spoke.

"Don't ask questions. Come," I whispered, unable to make my tired voice do more.

I led him into the living-room. The fire was out, of course, but the embers still glowed.

"Get some wood. Hurry, make a fire!" I told him.

He humored me, breaking a chair across his knees, although quite evidently he thought I was mad.

By the time I had got the manuscript out of the bag, there was a blaze on the hearth. Into it I threw the ancient pages. Holding Bryant's hand, I watched them catch fire. For a few minutes they burned, and it seemed to me that in the hiss of the flames I caught a human cry of agony.

When the last vestige of the manuscript had disappeared, I knew that I had reached the end of my rope.

"Bryant," I called uncertainly, and then fell in a heap at his feet.

AFTER that I was very ill. I was unconscious for days, and then there were long hours of delirium in which I lived over and over the horror of that awful night. Complete nervous exhaustion from overwork, the doctor called it, and only Bryant and Carl Van Wagen knew what the work had been. By the time I had recovered, the picture was finished.

Bryant brought the news to me. His eyes were shining as he told me that the studio said he was a great as well as a popular actor. "They're so pleased with me," he went on gleefully, "that they're positively human."

I didn't take in the significance of his words. I was so glad the picture was over and Bryant would never have to wear those hateful Florentine clothes again. I said as much.

"My dearest," Bryant took me in his arms, "since you burned the manuscript, I haven't minded playing Giulio—because it has been acting a part, not living it. You saved me, Lois—what are you going to do with me?"

A sudden shyness swept over me. Dale Arden the self-assured young designer was gone. In her place was Lois, a simple girl in love.

"The studio has released me from the non-marrying clause in my contract, mostly thanks to Van Wagen's influence, and they're giving me three weeks' holiday before I return to do bigger and better things." Bryant's voice was overflowing with happiness, "They've got a new contract all drawn up for the next two years for an eminent designer. It's made out for 'Mrs. Bryant Holden'. Will you sign it, darling?"

Suddenly his voice was serious, his eyes looked deep into mine.

A joy such as I had never thought to know surged through every atom of my being. All my rosiest dreams were coming true.

"Will you?" he asked again.

For answer, I put my lips on his.

Satan in Exile

By ARTHUR WILLIAM BERNAL

A stupendous weird novel of a space bandit whose exploits among the planets of our solar system made him a veritable Robin Hood of the airways

Prolog: Satan Comes to Earth

THE circumstances under which I first encountered Prince Satan, Lord of the Great Blackness, were, to say the least, very weird. The method of introduction was quite in keeping with Satan's habits; for the first thing I saw after one brief glance into his black, hypnotic eyes, glowing like coals in the darkness, was the slender, blackened muzzle of what was probably the most deadly ray-gun in the entire universe.

Naturally, Prince Satan himself was no stranger to me—I mean by reputation—for I had read and heard of the almost unbelievable exploits of this exile of space whose name was breathed in fearful whispers in every inhabited portion of three planets. Being young and having a flair for adventure myself, I had followed this amazing outlaw's career with increasing interest, from his first daring flirtations with death as a nameless and strangely crippled space bandit, until his continual brazen escapades were the common gossip of our tri-world civilization.

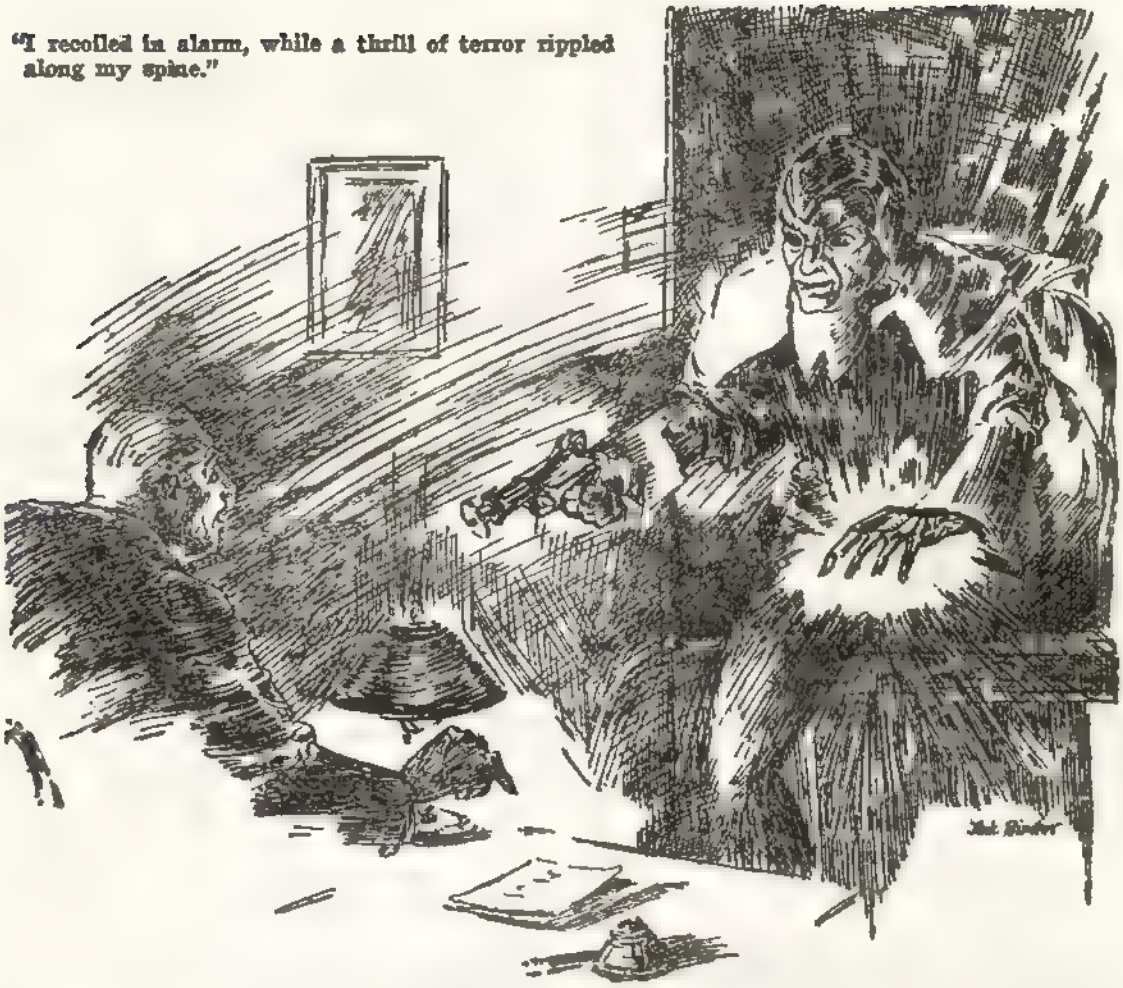
Yet this fearless buccaneer of the void was to me, as to the populace at large, more or less a half-legendary and almost supernatural figure—something entirely apart from my rather commonplace existence.

If anyone had told me earlier, that fateful day, that I should soon stand face to face with Prince Satan himself, and talk to him as he rested comfortably in my study, I should have laughed at the impossibility of such an encounter. Yet I did meet Satan that day; and not only on that one memorable occasion, but for many a similar rendezvous during the years to follow.

And though he may be branded as a ruthless villain, aye, murderer too, by the three worlds, I still say that, had it been possible for me to do so, I would gladly have given my own life to spare his—that of the most remarkable of all men—when the Code at last exacted from him its penalty.

I am an old man now, and an old man's opinion never carries much weight, but I still maintain—as I have during all the years of a very long life—that Prince Satan was not the barbarous, black-hearted brigand that history makes him out to be. Fifty years of close intimacy with humankind's greatest, by reason of my service in Earth's diplomatic affairs, enables me to state confidently that not one of the heroes of the last generation, whom I knew, could measure up to Prince Satan, exile of space, quality for quality, deed for deed.

Sometimes cruel; ruthless, desperate, bitter he was always, and yet a nobler, braver man than Prince Satan never trod this or any other earth. I write here again that, if there is one thing in my life



"I recoiled in alarm, while a thrill of terror rippled along my spine."

of which I can be proud, it is the fact that, through my contact with interplanetary affairs, I was able to be more than once of some slight service to that supersensitive Overlord of Space, during his stormy and hazardous career.

But it is not of my admiration for the greatest of interplanetary corsairs about which I have been asked to write, but rather the story of my first meeting with Prince Satan, the man with the steel arm, on the night he evened his great score with High Prince Fane, Overlord of Earth. . . .

One of the most curious features about my initial meeting with Satan is the fact that, when I first heard the tap of his metal fingers on my study window, I was half dozingly contemplating a portrait of Under-prince Torgeny, which faced me across the document-littered expanse of my desk.

It was shortly after the soft chiming of midnight, and I had been industriously checking over some important papers, which, in my capacity as under-secretary to High Prince Fane, it was my duty to arrange in order for a Tribunal conference scheduled next day. I was momentarily resting my eyes after a tedious siege, when my gaze had strayed to the picture on my desk. For a brief space I stared at the features of Prince Torgeny, admiring the clear cut of his visage,

splendid in its dark handsomeness. It was not difficult, I mused, to determine why he had been called the best-looking man at the terrestrial court.

Silky black hair topping a broad expanse of smooth forehead . . . thin, arched brows shielding dominating, intelligent eyes, as keen and amazingly black as a Martian's . . . nose straight and sensitive . . . nervous, thin-lipped mouth, delicate as an artist's . . . chin strong and resolute, without being prognathous . . . that was Under-prince Torgeny, of Earth's court. More than once I had called him, though not to his face, handsome as a sculptured hero.

With a sigh, I let my thoughts go racing into the past to the long-gone day when this same under-prince had been publicly hailed before High Prince Fane and the Grand Tribunal on a charge of treason. Drowsily, I reminisced over the fight we had made to save this man, whom I worshipped, from horrible disgrace. But High Prince Fane was Torgeny's bitter enemy, and the under-prince, saved from death only by his position, had been sentenced to exile in the frozen mines on far-flung Neptune's lone and dismal satellite, Triton.

Doomed to life as a slave on a world of eternal twilight—for ever banished from Earth! I recalled the flood of shame I had experienced as Torgeny's terrible sentence was pronounced upon him, a sentence far more hideous than physical torture for a man strung as hypersensitive as the handsome under-prince.

My thoughts next went skimming ahead to the day when Mars had picked up that strange radio-call for help from the *Oila*—the only time in his life the proud nobleman had ever asked for aid from anyone — which reached the red world with eery faintness from across nearly three billions of miles of airless void.

It was at this juncture when my melancholy musings were broken off by a metallic tapping against the glasteel pane behind me. I remember having recalled that pitiful cry for succor from Prince Torgeny as he and some six or seven others, having somehow gained control of the prison-ship *Oila*, headed helplessly toward the vast depths of outer space, at full speed, with the controls inexplicably locked; and I believe I was wondering in what spot of the infinite maw of the Great Blackness Torgeny's tomb was then drifting, when it happened. At any rate, whatever thoughts were in my head when I glanced casually over my shoulder were instantly dispelled at sight of the specter that confronted me from my balcony.

Although I had never beheld Prince Satan before, I had not the slightest doubt as to the identity of the dark form peering at me through the curtained window at this midnight hour. Every person on three planets could have identified that grotesque figure with the flashing dark eyes, clad in vivid scarlet tunic and doublet, a vast black cape draping its ebony folds from his slender shoulders. No one else ever had eyes like Satan's—deep-set orbs which glowed like flame-sheltering, translucent disks of obsidian. But even had those eyes of jet and the well-known crimson and ebon costume — all too familiar in the traffic lanes of the void—failed to strike a responsive chord in my mind, the sight of the Mefistofelian apparition's left hand, still resting against the curtained pane, would have been ample assurance that the man on the balcony was indeed Prince Satan, most notorious space corsair in the history of three worlds.

For that famous left arm—a miracle of scientific achievement about which vol-

umes have been written—gleamed in the night with the silver sheen of polished steel.

I recoiled in alarm, while a thrill of terror rippled along my spine. My frightened gaze traveled slowly from the shiny steel fingers on the window-ledge up to the deeply shadowed face, of which I could make out only the most fascinating pair of eyes a human ever had. Then, withdrawing my terrified stare from Satan's hypnotic one by a conscious effort of will, my eyes leapt downward again to freeze on the barrel of an ugly-looking ray-gun, which the most wanted man in the universe was coolly levelling at my heart with his flesh-and-blood right hand. For moments we stood thus: he calmly motionless; I, feeling that I was separated from grim death only by a thin sheet of glasteel, scarce daring to breathe.

He finally broke the chilled silence, softly calling to me in a voice vaguely familiar and strangely gentle.

"Kerio!" came the quiet whisper. "Parr Kerio! Open the window. I shan't hurt you—if you don't raise an alarm. Come on, man, pull yourself together. Open the window."

Mechanically, my eyes still glued to the slender rod of the blackened ray-gun, I fumbled with the latch, swung open the window, and stepped back. Satan chuckled, a low musical chuckle quite out of keeping with his formidable appearance, and in a trice was over the sill and had drawn down the shade. He was facing me again, almost before I realized it.

"Come now, Kerio," he said persuasively, and his voice was deceptively small and soothing, "don't stare so at my gun. I'm not going to hurt you. I told you I wouldn't. See, I'll put it away."

I gulped dryly as he gave his ugly weapon a careless twirl and slipped it loosely into its worn holster. But I knew better than to try to reach my own gun in a drawer of the desk.

Prince Satan

"There. Now look at me, Kerio. Recognize me?"

"Why—yes . . . Your Highness," I muttered feebly, then stopped aghast, as I lifted my eyes for the first time to scan my dread visitor's face in the soft, full light of my study lamp. I gasped speechlessly as recognition swept over me. In stupefaction I peered, wide-eyed, at that dark countenance whose counterpart stood framed on my littered desk.

"You—alive?" I choked, torn by a dozen bewildering emotions; "Prince Torgeny . . . *you*—Prince Satan?" I sank limply into my chair.

"Yes," he said very quietly, "Prince Torgeny, alive. Yes, Torgeny the traitor. Torgeny the exile. Torgeny, Lord of the Great Blackness. But tell me, dear Kerio, do you find me much changed? . . . Come, answer."

"You, Torgeny . . . Prince Satan!" I babbled uncomprehendingly, ignoring his question. But the exiled nobleman, whom I had long thought dead, was growing impatient.

"Come," he snapped, banging his metal fist sharply on the desk-top to jar me into attention. "I asked you—am I not changed? Look . . . look at my face. What do you see? Tell me, what do you see? Go on—go on, say it!"

IMAGINE, if you can, the horror that was mine as I gazed at that bronzed countenance, toughened by the raw winds of half a dozen planets, and hesitantly gave him the information he demanded.

"I see a scar—a terrible scar," I began reluctantly, and stopped short at sight of the fierce smile on his lips and the evil flame that was kindled in the depths of those space-black eyes.

Once handsome visage! The saturnine cosmic corsair before me bore small resemblance to the man I had known as Prince Torgeny. Bisecting his face diagonally, a huge and livid scar snaked, like a jagged streak of lightning, from somewhere near his left temple across his brow, through the nose, and down over his right cheek, to end in a vicious curl beneath his ear. His beard, permanently removed long ago by an electric needle, after the fashion of the time, was nonexistent; and thus the only shield over the scar was the pitifully inefficient, long black bangs of his shaggy head-dress, which reached down to his very eyebrows. But the strip of ugly scar tissue itself, though awful enough, was not what made me shudder. It was the terrible knowledge that to the sensitive Torgeny his unfortunate mutilation must represent a humiliating badge of shame. He who had once been so proud of his noble features, now disfigured so grimly! No wonder he had voluntarily remained hidden in the Great Blackness, his true identity kept secret beneath a cloak of piracy. I doubt whether any man could purposely devise a more hideous torment than that which had accidentally been bestowed upon Prince Satan.

"Dear Torgeny!" the cry welled involuntarily from my heart, in sympathy with his great suffering. He heard the cry, though I tried to stifle it, and recognized it for what it was.

For one fleeting instant his grim, tight-lipped mouth relaxed from its cruel twist into a soft smile of understanding and gratitude, and the clear, dark eyes momentarily hid their fire behind a mist. Silently he gripped my hand, and I knew we had remained brothers through the years.

"Prince, tell me—tell me the whole story," I pleaded, as Torgeny withdrew his hand from mine, in some embarrassment at his display of emotion. "How did you escape from the *Oila,* and how did you manage to live all this time? But first tell me why you came here tonight. What do you want of me?"

"This is the first time I have been to Earth for a long while," he said, easing himself into a comfortable chair at my bidding. "I came here tonight to pay an old debt of mine, and at the same time, to do Earth a great favor. I have accomplished both deeds already, and all I desire of you, now, is the shelter of your rooms until dawn. I must leave then to be on time for a little *tête-à-tête* with the transport *Lady of Asia,* just outside the orbit of Mars, in a certain secluded spot. May I stay till then?"

"Of course! But why did you frighten me half to death with that ray-gun—and what do you mean when you say you have just done Earth a great favor?"

"Listen," my strange guest smiled wryly; "when you are as popular with the space police as I am, and have as big a price on your head as I have, you'll take precautions not to raise any alarm when you pay anyone a visit, too. As to the favor I mentioned," the scarred face grew grim once more, "it was—well, connected with an old score I have long been intending to even."

"Well, tell me," I persisted. "What have you done?"

Prince Satan leaned back in his chair and sat regarding me silently for some moments, his scarred cheek twitching slightly from some involuntary reflex. He seemed to be weighing something in his mind with considerable care, and I no-

ticed, though he seemed unaware of it, that his right thumb was slowly and repeatedly tracing the path of the old wound, where it coursed over the lower portion of his face. It was a characteristic gesture of the space raider when he was deeply preoccupied. Finally he spoke, and his voice, as always, was calm, soft, and deliberate.

"Well, Kerio, I—I came here tonight to rid Earth of a malignant cancer. To put it simply and directly—now don't be shocked, Kerio—less than thirty minutes ago I had the extreme pleasure of killing His Excellency, High Prince Fane, Overlord of Earth, and as base a creature as ever drew breath."

I was on my feet in an instant. *"What?* You've killed His Excellency—murdered him in cold blood? You mean——"

"Quiet!" The command was like the hiss of a ray-gun.

I wrestled with the incredible words that were still ringing in my ears. Torgeny a murderer? A killer, cold-blooded and villainous? Impossible! I managed a thin smile.

"Your Highness is joking, isn't that it? You were, of course, only employing some figure of speech?"

Space-black eyes stared levelly into mine. The scarred face maintained its usual expressionless composure. The small, persuasive voice continued gently.

"No, Kerio. You did not misunderstand me. I have done just what I said. In a few hours the whole world will be seeking the murderer of the Overlord, Fane. But they will not find him here, just as they are not finding him now in the heart of space, for by that time I shall be elsewhere. I shall be but a mote in infinity—attending to another little piece of business. They will never catch me."

"But, Torgeny—you're not a murderer . . . not an assassin! You were elected to the nobility for your patriotism. Why——"

"Yes," the snake scar twitched again, as a bleak smile played over the thin lips of the man with the steel arm, "and don't forget: I was also exiled from my planet because of my treason. You recall the occasion, of course?"

"But, Torgeny——" I was at a complete loss for words. Each succeeding event of the past hour had added its measure to my growing bewilderment. But this last calmly-spoken horror had swept away my mental equilibrium. I slumped in my chair.

"But, Your Highness—I can't get you out of this. The stars alone know how much I love you, man"—all thoughts of formality were gone now—"but this—I can't——"

"There, there. Don't take it so hard." The voice was that of a governess soothing a fretting child. "I didn't come to you to get your help. I came here only because I couldn't leave Earth without a chat with you.

"Kerio, you don't quite understand the situation. It isn't as if I had killed a human being—rather, I feel as though I had squashed some nasty spider. I mean it, Kerio. A thing like Fane had no right to live and enjoy this wonderful world. . . . Oh, Kerio, no one can ever tell how much a man loves his mother planet until he has been forbidden ever to set foot upon it again!"

THIS last sentence, spoken with fervor, brought me out of my daze and filled my heart with pity for this lonely outcast. But I took pains to hide my emotion, for I had learned early in my acquaintance with Prince Torgeny that two things he could not, would not, stand, were scorn and pity.

"But, Prince," I put in stumblingly,

"Fane *was* a human being, you know—and your personal feeling against him does not alter that fact. The Interplanetary Code forbids murder, and what the Code——"

"To the Dark Nebulæ with the Code!" the brigand of the void cut me off, the white scar on his cheek twitching like a snake about to strike. "I am Prince Satan, Lord of the Great Blackness," he smiled a dark smile, "and Satan has ever made his own laws!"

"Why did you call High Prince Fane malignant?" I asked, hoping for an answer that would convince me that Torgeny's black deed was justifiable, but knowing intuitively that my desire would not be fulfilled. "He was elected to the nobility in early youth, and rose in the ranks until he swept to victory in the last Council balloting. He was——"

"Yes, of course he did," Torgeny's voice had lost its gentleness, become brittle. Once again that dark fire smoldered in the depths of his ebon eyes. "But how, Kerio, how? By ruthlessly cutting down all who opposed him—that's how. What happened to Currin, to Rathei, to Waltr—to a dozen others who stood in his way? Why, the same thing that happened to me, Kerio. He crushed us, broke us, *smashed us!* That's why I'm glad he's dead. That's why I'm glad it was through me that Earth has been freed of his tyranny—even though it means that right at this moment every ship of the space police is searching the void to burn me on sight."

"But how—why——" my befuddled brain was refusing to work.

"Listen, Kerio, my brother. While I wait for the arrival of dawn I will tell you everything—the whole story. Only you must promise not to interrupt, and you must give me your solemn oath that you will never, so long as I am alive, divulge any part of what I am going to tell you tonight. Will you swear to that?"

"Of course, if you wish it," I acquiesced. "I swear by my honor never to reveal anything which you are now going to tell me, so long as you live. But——"

"Not another word. I shall do all the talking. You must content yourself with listening. Agreed?"

I nodded.

My weird visitor leaned further toward me, clasping his hands together and resting them on my desk. Powerful steel fingers interlocked with flesh-and-blood ones. From that shiny metal forearm, the soft glow of my study lamp cast up a silvery reflection which brought the somber features of the exiled prince into eery relief. The tail of the pale, vicious scar curving across his right cheek twitched like a living thing as the tight-lipped mouth opened and closed in speaking. From beneath low bangs of thick black hair, hypnotic eyes—ebon as the shades of night on Pluto—stared into my fascinated ones.

The pirate prince was relating his story. . . .

1. Exiled to Triton

THE trial of Under-prince Torgeny was drawing to its conclusion, and the multitudes that crowded the vast Hall of Justice were hushed in breathless expectancy. The proud noble, indicted on a charge of treason, was now about to receive judgment from the Grand Tribunal.

High Prince Fane—Overlord of Earth and *ex officio* head of the Grand Tribunal—ordered the prisoner to rise and step forward. Defiantly, eyes afire, the young noble drew himself haughtily erect, and strode to the center of the dais adjoining the desk of the high prince.

"Prince Torgeny," the stern-voiced

judge declaimed, "the honorable judges have agreed upon a verdict."

His face an impassive mask, the dark under-prince faced the royal magistrate who was spokesman for the Grand Tribunal.

"Prince Torgeny, evidence presented during your trial has proved, to the satisfaction of the court, the following:

"One. That you had in your possession on and before the night of Universal 24th, 2307, certain highly valuable and secret documents. These documents, property of the Government, outlined successful experiments concerning the utilization of synthetic coronium as a new fuel for interplanetary vessels. Those papers it was your duty to have kept in security, without knowledge of their contents, until such time as they should be called for by the Universal Anti-War Fund representatives."

"True, Excellency. And I have sworn that I fulfilled the details of my office faithfully: I did not read those documents."

"Two. That on the morning of Universal 25th, when your rooms were searched——'

"Broken into without proper authority!"

"——no trace of these Government documents was found. In their stead, however, carefully secreted in a hidden box to which you alone had a key, was discovered a sum of money equalling something like $3,000,000 — which money was in Martian *kivos*—of which you strangely claim to have no knowledge."

At this pronouncement, the accused man whirled savagely upon the densely packed courtroom.

"People of Earth, listen to me. I swear before you now, as I have sworn on the witness stand during the trial, that I kept in that hiding-place those papers which I am supposed to have sold to a foreign power. That box was rifled by certain of His Excellency's thieving special agents" —here a gasp from the courtroom—"who took the records of the coronium experiments and replaced them with the marked money so as to incriminate me! And the motive of this unheard-of treachery—believe me—was the fact that this strong box also held papers of my own compiling, wherein I had irrefutable proof of High Prince Fane's own crass betrayal of his world on more than one occasion! And I say again, that the stealing of these latter papers was the real purpose——"

"Silence!" roared the High Prince, pounding on his desk with a gavel to still the sudden outburst among the spectators. Red-faced, he bent his gaze upon the heavily breathing prisoner and snapped frigidly: "Prince Torgeny, we have heard your evidence before. We must remind you that this trial is concluded."

Clearing his throat, the Overlord continued his formal oratory, while the accused prince stared blackly at the tessellated marble floor at his feet.

"To resume. Three. That one Zenii—a low Martian who formerly had acted as go-between in this transaction of yours with a yet unknown Martian Power—turned informer, for reasons of his own, and explained his part in the affair to one of my special agents——"

"Hmf!" an ironic grunt from Torgeny.

"——and agreed to pay you off with bank-notes marked by one of my secretaries, so that we could acquire proof of your criminal behavior.

"Four. That the documents turned over to that secretary on the morning of Universal 25th by Zenii, after his midnight tryst with you, were the same which had been trustingly placed in your care."

"Prince Fane, you know as well as I do

that I had never laid eyes on this Zenii before you bribed him to appear in court to testify against me!"

"And five," went on the impressive monolog, as though it had not been interrupted, "that in the face of a wealth of evidence in behalf of the State——"

"Evidence bought and paid for by Your Excellency!"

"We remind you for the last time, Your Highness, that your trial has been concluded. All such fantastic accusations on your part at this stage must be ignored by the court.

"Five. That evidence on the part of the State has been abundant in this trial, and evidence set forth by the accused—other than his character witnesses—has been practically negligible."

There was a short pause.

"Therefore, Prince Torgeny, it is the painful duty of this court to find you guilty of treason."

The courtroom gasped and buzzed at this conclusion to the trial, but Prince Torgeny glared unflinchingly at the man who had rendered judgment. "And they call the Grand Tribunal a court of justice!" he ground out acidly, unheard amid the murmur of the crowd by any save the man who faced him.

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His Excellency's gavel rapped for order, and the royal magistrate signaled for two guards to approach the dais on which the prisoner stood. It was noticed by those in the room nearest the railing which separated the spectators from the rest of the court, that for the first time since the trial had begun, Prince Torgeny displayed a face flushed with humiliation and disgrace, as the uniformed men advanced and stripped from his tunic the insignia denoting his rank.

When this shameful ordeal was through, the Overlord spoke again. "Torgeny," he said sympathetically, "it has been the disagreeable duty of this court to find you guilty of a grave crime—one whose punishment, in ordinary cases, calls for death. However, due to your former high position and your heretofore unblemished record, the death sentence has been suspended."

The prisoner raised his downcast gaze to stare wonderingly at the speaker. Another murmur, seemingly of approval, ran through the courtroom.

"In fact," High Prince Fane continued warmly, "if you will be kind enough to tell us one thing, an even greater leniency will be shown to you, in that your sentence will be shortened——"

"Don't waste your breath, Fane," put in the prisoner, coldly. "I see the reason for your sudden generosity. I suppose you want me to reveal to you the name of the Martian Power with which I have been dealing?"

"Exactly. Will you supply the court with this information?"

"I would be only too glad to do so, if there were such a Power as you have described. But Your Excellency knows, as well as I, that the Martian Power concerned in this trial is a mythical one—a figment of your own villainous imagination!"

A sudden gleam of hope dawned over the darkly handsome features of the condemned man, and a slow smile crept over his lips—for the first time in months. He shifted himself so that he stood with feet braced and arms akimbo—a characteristic position, which was to become a famous pose of a certain brigand of space.

"Your Excellency," Torgeny's voice was honey-sweet, for triumph seemed suddenly within his grasp, "may I offer a suggestion to the august court? If you are so anxious to secure the name of this Martian Power you speak of—why don't you

ask your informer, Zenii, for it? If he was so willing to testify against me, he ought to be equally happy to divulge the name of this Power, for you must remember that he too was once connected with it!"

A brief flicker of alarm, undetected by any but the condemned man, and instantly suppressed, had flashed across the aquiline features of High Prince Fane at the commencement of Torgeny's speech. But now that it was concluded, His Excellency seemed thoughtfully sad.

"It is very unfortunate," remarked the Overlord quietly, "but early yesterday morning the body of the Martian, Zenii, was discovered on the pedestrian level immediately below his balcony. He had evidently fallen sometime during the night and was instantly killed."

Torgeny's look of hope faded, and his form slumped despairingly.

"Fallen—or pushed?" he muttered, as if to himself; then, raising his fine eyes to meet the clouded ones of the high prince, he added, disheartened, "You win, Fane. Your methods, with your special agents and your spies, have me whipped. Pronounce sentence on me, and get this farce over with."

"It is the lamentable duty of this court to sentence you, Torgeny," the royal spokesman said loudly, in evident relief, "to fifteen years at the Triton prison camp. You are hereby exiled for that period to the mines on that Neptunian satellite. After such time when your term has expired, you will be free to live in any part of the universe you so desire, except upon Earth. Henceforth, you are banished from this your mother world."

For a moment after this stunning declaration, it seemed to the watching crowd that the condemned man was on the verge of collapse. One of the guards sprang forward, arms outspread, to catch him as he swayed. But the feeling of vertigo was only momentary, and Torgeny drew himself once more erect, warding off the approaching officer disdainfully.

Like a creature of stone Torgeny stood immobile, facing his enemy. For a long minute he stared eye to eye with the man who had so completely ruined him, while the courtroom hummed like a giant beehive. But to Torgeny and to Fane there was no courtroom and there was no crowd—there was naught in all the universe save themselves. Neither man spoke, but each read in the other's eyes things that no words could ever say.

At last, able to withstand the smoldering intensity of Torgeny's stare no longer, Fane's gaze shifted uneasily to his hands, outstretched on the marble desk-top. He saw that his palms were glistening with cold sweat.

Then Torgeny managed a wraith-like smile, and the human bees gasped admiringly at his herculean efforts at composure. The prisoner opened his mouth to speak, and while that great assemblage marveled at the quiet smoothness of his voice as it sounded clearly through the abruptly silent hall, he addressed his regal enemy thus:

"Prince Fane, I have changed my mind. I do not admit defeat. You have graciously spared my life so that I may dwell for ever in banishment—a fate more terrible than the most hideous death, because it is more lasting. You have judged me guilty of treason. Very well, I fulfill that judgment.

"Listen well, Prince Fane. If I ever escape from Triton—*and I swear I will*—I shall come to you from across three billion miles of void to make you pay for what you have done to me today. Remember that!"

Without further parley, looking neither to right nor left, Torgeny, incredible in his superb equanimity, strode out of the courtroom, followed in silence by his guards.

2. *Feloth Gambles*

All during the long trial, an aged man of noble bearing had been among the first to arrive and the last to depart. At each session of the court he would sit, with austere features furrowed, in rapt concentration on every spoken syllable. His wise, kind countenance and distinctive appearance had early attracted the attention of those among whom he sat, but few in the assemblage, despite their evident curiosity, realized that the old man was blind. Even fewer recognized him as the great and venerable scientist, Feloth.

During the whole of the time the aged scientist had attended the Grand Tribunal, he had never vouchsafed a single comment to his neighbors, though he was kindly countenanced toward them all. But now, at the moment when High Prince Fane was about to dismiss the court after the dramatic exit of the banished prince, Feloth rose to his feet and cried out in a voice clear and strong in spite of his years:

"Wait! Your Excellency, I have something to say which will be of great interest to you!"

Startled, the Overlord's eyes followed those of the entire court to seek the source of this unusual interruption. As his gaze fell upon the tall, straight figure of the blind scientist, his lean face registered instant recognition.

"Feloth! What does this mean?"

"I beg the hearing of this court for a moment," the voice of the sightless wise man thrilled, clarion-like, through the Hall of Justice, "exercising my privilege as an honorary member of the Council."

"Speak, Feloth," granted Fane respectfully.

"As you are well aware, High Prince," commenced Feloth slowly, "I am the author of those papers which Prince Torgeny has been so basely accused of selling to betray his planet. I do not know whether or not I, as the deviser of a practical spatial fuel from synthetic coronium, have any right to beg the leniency of the court in behalf of the man convicted of misuse of these documents, but I demand at this time another trial of Prince Torgeny's case, to be deferred until this whole matter has been carefully reinvestigated—by the proper universal authorities, and not by a staff of Your Excellency's special agents."

"Feloth," replied the Overlord quickly, "Torgeny has received a fair trial, as everyone present will admit, and has been duly found guilty by the Grand Tribunal on the evidence presented. He has been sentenced and the case is closed. What you now ask is quite impossible. Why do you make such a remarkable request?"

"Because I don't believe he is guilty!" thundered Feloth, scarcely giving Fane time to finish. "But, guilty or not, I want Torgeny set free, and I think I have the means to make you accede to my demands!

"Five years ago when I was blinded by a coronium explosion in my laboratory, and consequently lost my official position on the Scientific Council, of all those who called themselves my friends, not one would give me a chance to prove that blindness did not handicap my work, save Torgeny. Through his kindness alone I have been able to carry on my experiments with synthetic coronium and bring them to a successful conclusion. Because of this——"

Feloth

"Feloth, we must ask you to be seated if this sentimental chaff is all you have to tell. This has no bearing on the present case, except to indicate the condemned man's craftiness in keeping your experiments close at hand."

"No, Excellency, but this 'sentimental chaff' is what supplies me with my reason for demanding the immediate release of Prince Torgeny," explained the old man heatedly. "Now here is what I have to say to you, Prince Fane. It was not revealed here in court—apparently for purposes of your own—that, due to a mistake which my dictowriter made in transcribing the records of my experiments, the entire last three pages of formulæ therein are erroneous. By following those formulæ printed in the Government's transcriptions of my work, synthetic coronium could never be manufactured in a million years.

"When my attention was called to the discrepancies in the records, I immediately set to work to correct them. Now it is an extremely fortunate coincidence that—even though you may have access to the present Governmental transcriptions and can discover the exact manner in which to employ coronium as a super-fuel—unless I supply the last three pages of correct symbols, you are not much better off than were the scientists of a century ago. No one but myself has an inkling of how the revised copy should read. The sole existing copy of that correction is at present in my laboratory.

"Now, here is my offer. Even though I know it is my duty to turn over those corrected pages to you, Prince Fane, I shall refuse to do so unless you order the immediate release of Prince Torgeny." Long, nimble fingers felt of a watch dial. "I give you exactly three minutes to grant my request, Your Excellency."

"I don't need three minutes to give you your reply, Feloth," barked Fane sharply. "I *command* you, as High Prince and Overlord of Earth, to turn over to me your corrected sheets of formulæ. Torgeny's sentence will not be revoked!"

"Ho, ho!" the rich laugh of Feloth rang out. "You command me! And if I refuse?"

"If you refuse, it will be tantamount to joining Torgeny in his conspiracy against the peace and security of Earth; and such being the case, it will go hard with you despite your age and your past services in behalf of the Government. But you are not called Feloth the Wise without good reason. You will not refuse."

"Well, I do! Come, Prince Fane, your time is growing short. Do you want my synthetic coronium process, or not?"

"Yes. We want it, and we'll get it," ground out the Overlord. He glared about the courtroom in regal anger. "Guard! You there, arrest this man! Comstoc, here! Go at once to Feloth's apartments, Comstoc, and don't return without those sheets of formulæ!"

THE courtroom was a raucous tumult while a burly guard thrust himself down the aisle and grabbed the white-haired scientist firmly by the arm, declaring him under arrest. Feloth waited stolidly, offering no resistance and making no effort to elude his captor. Instead, he felt once again of his watch dial; then raising his voice above the babble of the excited crowd, he shouted:

"Wait! Stop that man before he leaves the courtroom. Prince Fane, that man has

no authority whatever to search my rooms!"

Fane hesitated but the merest fraction of a second before shouting undignifiedly across the hall: "Comstoc! I deputize you as a special agent with full authority to search a traitor's quarters!"

Feloth made no response to this, and now the mounting hum of the spectators held a note of sympathy and disappointment. They would have liked to see the old man gain at least a temporary victory. But the blind man, held securely in custody by the police officer, waited calmly and unworriedly, slim fingers gently contacting the raised numerals of his timepiece. A moment later he burst into derisive laughter.

"We do not understand your attitude, Feloth," scowled Fane. "This means a heavy prison sentence for you, you know."

"Ah, but that is not why I laughed. This is the joke. Those pages of formulæ, which your agent has so hurriedly left the court to get, are no longer in existence."

"What do you mean?"

"Simply this. When I left my rooms this afternoon, I gave to my secretary a roll of papers, among which were the ones you want. I told this secretary—and he is very obedient and meticulously punctual—to hold these papers in readiness; and unless he heard from me by radiophone before fifteen minutes past the sixteenth hour, to burn them, carefully destroying the ashes with *chika*-fluid afterward. Since he was entirely ignorant of what those papers contained, their ashes are even now dissolving without trace, in a beaker of *chika*. Your Excellency, it is now exactly seventeen minutes past the sixteenth hour, by my watch."

"Feloth, you devil!" bawled Fane, entirely forgetful of the avidly listening audience. "You left orders to destroy the only——"

He broke off suddenly, the savageness registered on his face giving way to an ugly smile.

"Feloth," the Overlord's tones were suddenly smooth, "Feloth, you must know how those formulæ should read, else you wouldn't have taken this chance. And you are going to tell me the way they should read, Feloth. Oh, yes you are! If not voluntarily, then by force. There are certain ways at our disposal——"

"You think I am afraid, Prince Fane? You think I did not foresee this predicament? I would rather cut out my tongue than betray my secret—and if it proves necessary, I shall do just that. On one condition only will I reveal the correct version of my formulæ for synthetic coronium—that you freely pardon my benefactor, Prince Torgeny."

"We have already told you that such a request is quite out of the question," grated Fane, his hawk-like face flushed with anger. "But never fear, Feloth, you'll tell us what we want to know. You'll be glad to—to save your own skin."

"I repeat, Prince Fane," replied Feloth with great firmness, "I am not afraid. I alone of the whole universe can give you the information which you desire, and until you set Prince Torgeny free, that information remains locked in here." And tapping a long finger against his broad brow, the blind scientist smiled a slow smile of triumph.

3. *Drama on the Prison Ship*

It had been a fiendishly humiliating situation, Torgeny was telling himself, as he and his guards strode across the heat-withered turf of the landing-field toward the prison ship *Oila*. Prince Torgeny, a nobleman, saying good-bye to

Lady Myryam, his betrothed, as a low convict, exiled to the mines on Triton. How could a decent man say good-bye properly to the woman he loved, in a public square, surrounded by the flotsam of the lowest levels?

He went through that brief but agonizing scene bitterly, and his guards, catching a glimpse of the expression on his face, fingered the butts of their ray-guns uneasily. Torgeny, in turn, caught their gesture, and chuckled mirthlessly with a laugh that spurted like acid. Anyway, he consoled himself, loosening the coarse collar of his white prison tunic, Parr Kerio had had wit enough to sense his humiliation and rush Myryam away as speedily as possible.

The forlorn trio came to the open entrance-port of the *Oila,* and Torgeny shuffled his crudely booted feet with leaden clumsiness while he waited to be checked in. One other passenger was ahead of him, a brutal-looking, hairy Venusian—a swampland renegade, surly and but half civilized. Originally one of that lawless band exiled to the sweltering and monster-infested fens of Venus by that planet's more cultured highland inhabitants, this criminal had escaped to Mars, committed some cruel bestiality there and thence had fled to Earth. Apprehended, he was now to be taken back to the Martian capital for trial and sentence. The hulking, superstition-ridden creature eyed the slender Torgeny with profound disgust, and rudely turned his back.

That passengers of the Triton-bound *Oila* were generally only of the most degraded sort, Torgeny well knew, since they were almost invariably chosen from that evil class of men fit to exist on no civilized world of the solar system. And here he was, a man of the nobility, destined to live among such spawn of the various underworlds for fifteen long years —unless, of course, he was killed in some brawl before his term had expired. High Prince Fane must certainly be satisfied with the way things had worked out. Well, he——

Torgeny's thoughts were interrupted as a beefy guard—almost as thick-set as the towering Venusian convict—yanked at his heavy manacles and pulled him, stumbling, into the smelly corridor of the ship.

"Careful there, Stully," cautioned one of Torgeny's former escorts. "That man was of the nobility. Used to be a prince."

"Yeah?" grunted Stully, unimpressed. "Well, I'm the prince on this here boat, see? And this guy doesn't happen to be a prince no longer, else why would they exile him to our little Blue Paradise on Triton? Go on, Your Royal Highness, step lively or I'll crown you right."

Mindful of the tales of unwarranted brutality he had heard concerning such transports as the *Oila,* the inwardly seething Torgeny blundered down a creaky ladder into the ship's dismal hold, prodded from behind by the burly Stully, who was still laughing boisterously at his own witticism.

"Stully, go easy," one of Torgeny's erstwhile jailers called down the hatchway. "He's all right, that fellow."

"Shut up!" growled Stully, flicking his long whip at the face peering in at him. "I'm boss on this tub, and I'll give the orders. A criminal is a criminal to me. And besides, I never did like no princes anyway. Come on, into this room, you."

Torgeny was soon fastened by one leg to a length of heavy chain alongside the evil-smelling furry man from Venus, who morosely ignored this insult and crept into the dimness as far away from Torgeny as his chain would permit. Stully snapped off the manacles of both prison-

ers, and left them rubbing their chafed limbs with an admonition to "behave themselves".

When Torgeny had eased his throbbing wrists as much as he was able, he peered intently into the half-light around him, but could make out very little.

"Is it always dark like this?" he asked his neighbor, striving to keep all repugnance from his voice.

"Listen, pale man," purred the Venusian in silky tones, characteristically deceptive, "I want you not talk me. I go not Triton. I drop off Mars at—face trial. I want not acquaint me with you—we of two classes. Not all time dark here—lights go on when up sky. I to sleep now—if you make sounds, I kick with boots that woman face yours. *L'moodowl-d'a?*"

"Yes, I understand all right," assented Torgeny, "but I want——"

The rest of his sentence remained unsaid, for at that instant the warning bell clanged and in a moment more the *Oila* was lurching skyward. The long journey had begun. They were off for Mars, the first stop on the way to Neptune.

The first mealtime brought, besides its allotment of watery stew, a considerable shock to Torgeny. The man who carefully threaded his way to the prisoners with the stew-pans had the familiar figure of a very tall, very erect old man, also in white prison garb.

"Feloth!" cried the banished prince, incredulous. "What are *you* doing here?"

The blind man set down his pans, was cursed roundly by the melancholy Venusian, and felt his way to Torgeny's side, seating himself on the floor of the speeding ship beside his friend.

"I've been exiled from Earth and sentenced to do hospital work at the Triton prison camp, until I tell Fane what he wants to know," answered the white-haired scientist, and explained at length all that had occurred at the Grand Tribunal after Torgeny's exit.

"But why don't you give them the information they want?" asked Torgeny when the other's narration was ended. "Fane will have to turn it over to the universe at large, now that the experiments have been mentioned in court. You mustn't do this for me!"

"Ah, but I must," retorted Feloth with finality.

"Why? You have no reason for doing so."

"On the contrary," said Feloth gently, "I have every reason for doing so. I love you, my son."

Time passed tediously for the exiled prince, for even had interplanetary travel been a novelty to him he could have seen nothing from where he was chained. All sight of the myriads of brilliant star splotches eternally watching, hard and glaring like cold cyclopean eyes, from their places in the black gulf was denied the prisoners, for their dingy quarters boasted of no ports whatever. Indeed, the only incidents breaking the monotony—for the huge swamp-man stolidly refused to speak—were Feloth's occasional visits to the prison-room for short conversations.

But the *Oila,* being in fairly good condition and driven with reckless haste by the drunken Stully, made the trip to Mars in a surprizingly short period, and landed at the huge space-port of Vraejui-Volwyrd in record time. At the Martian field, Overseer Stully turned over the taciturn Venusian to wizened, arrogant Martian authorities of high caste, refueled the *Oila,* took on a heavy cargo of supplies for Triton, and exchanged his Terrestrial crew for eight or nine low-caste plainsmen.

TORGENY liked the squat, spongy and docile desert Martians as they padded about the ship like barrel-chested, red monkeys of superhuman size. Their friendly gutturals always carried a note of encouragement or sympathy for the chained prince, whenever any of them passed him by. The Earthman was a bit surprized at their unexpected show of intelligence, for their flat, dog-like faces registered little expression except for their protuberant, heavy-lidded eyes, which they ludicrously rolled as a convenient means of punctuating their remarks. Another point in their favor, in Torgeny's estimation, was that they had none of that superciliousness so evident in high-caste red men.

It was not until they were half-way to Neptune that Torgeny learned the true status of the Martian crew. Feloth, whose work in the upper cabin allowed him to garner a good deal more information than was supposed by the ship's officers, explained the pitiful situation to Torgeny one day after the latter had observed the cruel lacerations streaking the backs of several of the gentle creatures, apparently produced by Stully's ever-alert whip.

The exiled nobleman's horror was unbounded when he discovered that, while officially registered as a relief crew in the ship's log, the simple plainsmen were in reality no more than slaves. Indeed, they had been sold outright to the original crew of the prison-ship by secret traders among the high-caste Martian group, who illegally made fortunes by exploiting their less civilized brothers.

"So it's a slave-ship as well as a prison-ship, eh?" snorted Torgeny at this disagreeable knowledge. "I wonder if Fane is mixed up in this nasty business, too. Yes, I'll bet he'd have to do some quick thinking if the space police ever found out about this state of affairs."

Just then a furious padding of spongy feet sounded from the corridor outside the convict-hold, and Waugh, one of the biggest of the unfortunate Martians, appeared suddenly in the doorway, his round eyes rolling in grotesque fright. After him staggered a cursing, drunken Stully, whip in hand. Waugh ducked inside the place just ahead of the biting lash and cringed against the far wall. Torgeny saw his broad back glisten with wet blood.

Stully stopped at the threshold, panting heavily, his narrow eyes bleary from too much Martian *llaka*. "So, you red desert dog. You run away from Stully, huh? Come here!"

"Look out, Stully," warned Torgeny icily. "Some day one of these poor things will turn on you and tear you to pieces."

"Bah!" grunted Stully. "You keep your sissy face out of this, or you'll get a taste of the whip, too. Waugh, come here! Would you hurt me?"

The giant from Mars shambled hesitantly over to the drunken guard. "No," he boomed in awkward English. "Pale man priest of *bana-doj*. Waugh's master sell Waugh to you. You give me orders. Waugh kill you — ancestors punish Waugh."

"See?" jeered Stully, showing Torgeny a number of pin-point scars on his wrist. "It's in his religion. Some of my blood flows in his veins and some of his in mine. We're blood brothers. And besides being a pale man, I got an old desert rat to make me and my officers *bana-doj* medicine men to boot. If he purposely harms a blood brother who is a priest, a Martian has to pay for it when he dies by living ten thousand years or so locked outside the gates of *bana*—Martian heaven. Oh, us officers make sure we're pretty safe before we have anything to do with these red gorillas, don't worry about that!

"And now you, Waugh. How do you like that? And that? And——"

Stully's whip whistled through the air and bit deeply into the rubbery hide of the luckless slave again and again. The suffering red man winced soundlessly under each heavy blow; only his big eyes revealed the pain he felt, and implored mercy. Torgeny sat, quivering with rage, until he could endure the bully's brutality no longer. Then his suppressed fury burst its bonds, and he leapt to his feet with a cry.

"Stop it, Stully! Stop it, you beast! Let the poor devil alone! Let him alone, will you!"

Springing forward, Torgeny clutched Stully's whip-hand and tried to wrest the weapon from his grasp. Stully bellowed in incoherent rage.

"Let go there, you!" roared the drink-sodden overseer; and with a twist and a back-hand slap, he sent the slighter Earthman sprawling.

Waugh sank into a quivering heap as the savage lash hissed down upon him once more. But Torgeny was not out of the fight yet. He was on his feet again in a flash, thrusting Feloth aside when the scientist would have restrained him. The next second he was hurling himself at the brutal guard.

"You rotten beast!"

Torgeny sank his fist into a heaving, hairy chest. The two men grappled. Huge arms encircled Torgeny's trunk and exerted a fearful pressure. Stully's hot breath, laden with *llaka* fumes, fanned his brow. Torgeny grunted with pain, and flailed the sweating body as it smothered him. Abruptly twisting loose an arm, he swung hard for Stully's drooling lips. The huge overseer jerked his head aside and spat blood.

A mighty wrench swung the smaller man off his feet, sent him crashing to the metal floor. Stully stooped over his fallen adversary before the latter could squirm erect again, snatching at his whip, which he had dropped during the brief struggle. Torgeny crooked the bull-neck in an elbow and sent a short jab to the brutish face.

Stully shook free and rose, whip in hand. He raised the lash to strike, but was driven backward by another of Torgeny's punishing blows. Pressing his unexpected advantage, Torgeny followed close, hammering his opponent's huge bulk with a shower of fists. The thick-necked overseer reeled across the cabin, blinking liquor-cloudy eyes in wordless pain, under the heavy onslaught. All at once the battling pair came to the end of the prisoner's chain. There was a sudden jerk, and Torgeny's legs shot from beneath him. He was down.

The fight ended before the prisoner could strike another blow. In his short respite while Torgeny scrambled upright, Stully wiped a red smear from his face, sucked in a great gulp of oxygen, and steadied himself for the next attack.

Torgeny raised his head, and by that move he was undone. With the pale, grim face of the prince as target, Stully's bulging muscles flexed and sent the black lash whistling through the air. It cut Torgeny's tilted head with a smack that echoed through the cabin. Torgeny shrieked in agony as hot irons ripped across his features, and tumbled backward in a still heap. Blood oozed over his battered visage while Waugh crooned piteous, sympathetic gutturals to his fallen champion.

"There, Your Highness," snarled Stully through split lips as he staggered out into the corridor, "I guess that shows you I'm a better prince than you are. Filthy nobility, anyway!"

Feloth, crawling to his friend on hands

and knees, found Torgeny conscious and moaning with pain. Waugh, with the incredible toughness of his race, was already slowly picking himself up, preparatory to returning to his work.

Despite his great knowledge of medicine, Feloth was handicapped because of inadequate materials; consequently all efforts to prevent the terrible streak of scar tissue from coming failed miserably, and the old man realized that henceforth the unfortunate exile's handsome face would remain marked for ever.

That sleeping-period while Feloth administered to his dreadful hurt, Torgeny muttered grimly through his thick swathe of bandages, "When Stully did this to me, he did not know it, but he was signing his own death warrant."

To Torgeny's roster of vengeance had been added a second name.

4. *Escape*

IN THREE more space-days the *Oila* would arrive at Triton, twilight Neptune's lone satellite, in whose radium-encrusted bowels the exiled prince was sentenced to labor. The wounded prince was now feeling much better and his bandaged face gave him no serious annoyance, so successful was Feloth's wondrous medicine even though hampered by a dearth of adequate materials.

Torgeny was engaged in quiet conversation with the rubbery-skinned Waugh, whose own whip-cuts were all but healed, being now mere pink threads of tender skin striping his back. Torgeny had often held whispered conferences with Waugh and his friends since his accident, and only they were fully aware of the flame which burned within him. Even Feloth believed he had persuaded the wounded man to accept his fate with resignation.

"Then you will do it, Waugh?" Torgeny was asking earnestly. "It will set you free, and you won't be responsible for what happens to him. I'll attend to that. Will you?"

"Yes, master," rumbled the Martian, now a devoted slave to the befriending Earthman, after a dubious pause. "Waugh does it. Tina and Gloh—they help. Next day, while air-lock is filled with supplies —lots noise then, master. Stully won't hear—we do it."

"Good boy!"

Waugh beamed, happily proud, and departed. It is typical of low-caste Martians to hate slowly, but to love easily.

That sleeping-period Torgeny related his plans to Feloth, who remonstrated in vain. Finally, upon the old man's flat refusal to allow Stully to be killed outright, Torgeny did relent to the extent of promising undeserved leniency to the unsuspecting guard. But after he had given in that much, Torgeny would listen to nothing further that Feloth had to say.

The next space-day, when most of the crew were engaged in filling the air-lock with as much of the cargo as it would hold in preparation for the anticipated landing, and the corridors of the prison-ship resounded with the echo of banging chests, Waugh and two of his fellows padded nervously into the convict-hold where Torgeny fretted impatiently.

Without a word the three monstrous red men filed across the threshold, eyes rolling wildly, and approached the bandaged prisoner. With monosyllabic grunts, the trio of plainsmen wrapped stubby fingers about the heavy chain which fastened Torgeny to the side of the ship. Bracing

Waugh

broad, flat feet against the metal wall, the three Martians strained to free the captive, the rusted links of thick steel tautening under the steady pull of huge arms whose bulging muscles were inured to the most strenuous labors.

Torgeny waited breathlessly. Would the chains give or hold? It seemed that they were destined to hold. The chains were rusty from the dampness of the hold, but they were not rusty enough. The massive rescuers finally dropped, panting, to the floor.

Then Waugh, more resourceful than the rest, slipped from the room, to reenter a moment later with a stout iron bar in his hands. This he inserted in the staple bolted to the ship's wall, and the three set to work again with renewed effort.

Torgeny groaned as the bar bent slowly under the combined efforts of the Martians. It seemed hopeless. He was on the verge of ordering his willing friends to desist in their futile attempt, when there came the sudden *spang!* of tortured metal and the length of heavy links clanked upon the cabin floor.

Swiftly the Earthman scooped up his chain and stepped to the doorway, while Waugh, in accordance with Torgeny's plan, called down the corridor to the guard at its far end.

"Master!" he bawled. "Tina — he's hurt. Master come quick in big hurry!"

Whether or not he suspected a trick, the guard ran unhesitatingly toward the convict-hold. He felt confident that his only danger was from the prisoner who was chained to the far wall; and the entranceway was safely beyond reach of anyone in chains.

That luckless guard never fully realized what happened. No sooner had he set foot inside the convict-hold, than a heavy chain crashed down upon his unwary head. Torgeny kneeled and bent over him.

"He's—he's dead," muttered Torgeny strangely, for he had had no real quarrel with this particular guard, and he had never killed a man before. It took real effort to recall himself to the business at hand, so great was his disagreeable shock. "Waugh," he ordered at last, "go above and get Feloth out of the way. I'm coming right behind you, so watch out."

The slain guard carried the customary ray-gun, which Torgeny gratefully appropriated. While he waited for Waugh to obey his instructions, the bandaged prisoner rid himself of his cumbersome length of chain by the simple expedient of burning it through. Torgeny then motioned the wide-eyed Martian pair to follow him, and raced down the empty passageway toward the ladder.

His capture of the *Oila* was as rapid as it was unexpected. All the officers of the ship—four Earthmen, including Stully—had gathered near the air-lock, except for the one who now lay dead below. At Torgeny's cry to stand to, only one of the startled four even attempted to draw his ray-gun, and that one uttered a howl of pain as a quivering needle of dull red reduced his thumb to a smoking stub. After that, the under-officers submitted quietly, and Stully, drunker even than usual, confined his remonstrances to mere curses.

FELOTH emerged from hiding and placed himself at Torgeny's side. Torgeny motioned Waugh over to the levers controlling the air-lock and gave hurried instructions for operating them. The rest of the Martian crew, who had been working industriously before Torgeny's entrance, now stood immobile in their places, taking in the scene with mild surprize. To the desert-dwellers a pale man was a pale man, and it mattered little

which of them they served as master. The fact that Stully and his men were reputedly *bana-doj* priests was also of little consequence, for the plainsman religion is one of fear and not of love.

"Now, Stully, and you others," Torgeny said, and his voice was as quiet and casual as though he too were one of the callous red men, "I must ask you to enter the air-lock. Against my better judgment, I have been persuaded to spare the lives of you all." Here he glanced meaningly at Stully himself. "When I give the word—and not one second before—I want you to enter the life-shell there. It will be a tight fit, but you won't have to stay in it for very long. I will then have you immediately dropped. You should have little trouble making Triton from here. What happens when you get there is your own lookout. Now, be so kind as to step inside the lock, gentlemen."

Sullenly, while Waugh let his hands play uncertainly over the controls of the lock, the slovenly crew of unshaven guards backed into the compartment containing the small space-craft of which Torgeny had spoken, their hands high above their heads.

Then it happened. The big air-lock was crowded with bales and bundles which were to have been strung on behind the life-shell, when that tiny ship was to be released over Triton's official quarters. Now, as Stully and his men proceeded disgruntledly into the lock, the burly overseer dodged unexpectedly behind a broad metal food-chest and whipped out his ray-gun. The others instantly made a frantic dive for cover and did likewise.

Tss!

The thin red beam licked out as Stully squeezed the trigger. But Torgeny, with the rapidity of thought, had shoved the sightless Feloth roughly out of range, and himself ducked behind another of the numerous, scattered chests which had been so hastily abandoned by the Martians. Stully's hissing charge blistered the paint of the cabin wall, but otherwise did no damage.

"Shut the lock, Waugh!" shouted Torgeny from his hiding-place. "Lock them in! *Pull that lever!*"

But Waugh was confused by the sudden excitement; he could not make up his mind which of the several levers to pull.

A ray-gun's slender barrel crept slowly from behind a low box in the air-lock, and Torgeny, again shouting for Waugh to act, sent the weapon to the floor glowing hotly from an accurately aimed charge. Years of practise on an inside range, while nothing like the conditions he at present found himself in, still stood him in good stead.

Then Feloth, trying to edge closer to Torgeny, exposed himself for a moment. Stully's pistol was around the corner of his shield and fired in an instant. The red finger of death scorched the white hair of its target and hissed spitefully at the metal wall behind. Torgeny screamed a warning, and thrust himself into full sight. His own weapon clattered to the floor, as in hastily pushing his sightless comrade behind cover, he tripped and fell.

Waugh reached dazedly for one of the lever handles, wishing to aid his bandaged friend but not knowing exactly how. The other Martians huddled fearfully in one corner of the cabin, their eyes wide circles of terror. The smell of burnt paint was heavy in the hot, stale air.

Quivering streaks of red doom crisscrossed in hissing flashes, as Stully's men blindly sought to transfix the prostrate Torgeny. Then Stully bellowed and jerked upright, out of hiding. He took careful aim as Torgeny drew his limbs

under him. The escaped prisoner sprang for cover at the exact moment when Stully pressed his trigger. A super-heated pencil of energy caught the bandaged Earthman's left arm just above the elbow. Torgeny's form crumpled into a writhing knot. Stully cursed at his ill-fortune and aimed again, this time certain of a bull's-eye on the wriggling body. The rest of his men watched with ready guns, in case their leader should miss.

Torgeny rolled desperately to his knees and glanced at the shelter behind which Feloth lay, stunned. That one look assured him that he was going to be too late. In a moment more his career would be at an end. He ceased his hopeless floundering toward safety, and Overseer Stully's ugly laugh rang out in triumph.

"Now, you dirty traitor," Stully was roaring, "I'll show you what the Code says to do with mutinous prisoners. Stand up and take it! Come on, get up!"

Torgeny's frantic gaze swept the floor, spied his own gun far out of reach. His staring eyes swung to the gross form of the overseer, slipped past the menacing muzzle of his pistol, and fastened themselves on the fat forefinger slowly tightening within the trigger guard. He tried to stagger to his feet.

It was at that instant Waugh made up his mind. He yanked hard on a lever. As he pressed down on the long handle, he felt that it was the wrong one. It was, in fact, the emergency lever. As it plunged home, the inner and outer doors of the air-lock clanged almost simultaneously. The inner door dropped with a smash and a hiss from the cabin dome, instantly sealing Torgeny and his party safely within the ship's hull behind a thick metal slab. On the heels of the first clash of metal on metal, the emergency mechanism swung open the outer door to the air-lock before the dumfounded Stully and his men could move an inch. With the opening of that outer door, the brawny overseer and his aides, together with half a dozen loose bales, were sucked instantaneously out into the hungry maw of the void, drawn into the chilling depths of space by a screaming swirl of air which vanished in that greatest of all vacuums in the merest twinkle of an eye.

It was all over in a flash. One moment Stully and the under-officers of the *Oila* had stood, alive and with hot blood throbbing triumph through their veins, inside the air-lock; the next they were four ghastly huddles of frozen human flesh, shooting swiftly astern as they were momentarily caught in the spurting exhaust flames of the speeding vessel—four horribly bloated corpses, charred and blackened beyond recognition, half devoured by the searing rocket blast, spinning and twisting aimlessly through dark eternity.

Feloth, the blind scientist, and Torgeny, the banished prince, though not unscathed, were in full command of the *Oila*.

They were free. And in Torgeny's thoughts stirred the remembrance of the grim promise he had made High Prince Fane, Overlord of Earth, and to that fateful someday when they two should meet again. . . .

Don't miss the next installment of this story, which narrates an amazing and astonishing weird adventure in the depths of Space. Reserve your copy now at your news dealer's.

"At that instant he knew that the thing was not human."

Flapping Wings of Death

By AMELIA REYNOLDS LONG

A tale of shivery horror, of mysterious murders, and the frightful thing that flapped its bat-wings on the plain after sunset

"I TELL you, Noel, the place is accursed!" Victor Langland leaned toward me across the polished old mahogany table. His silky hair was unkempt, and his eyes were wild. "If you are wise, you will flee from it as from a pestilence."

I smiled at his dramatic manner. "My dear chap," I said, "if it is as bad as all that, why don't you leave yourself? Why

do you continue to breathe its contaminated atmosphere?"

"Leave?" he repeated, and there was longing in his voice. "I wish to God I could! But I am doomed. You are still safe, Noel; go before it is too late."

His strange words and nervous, jerky manner puzzled me. Could this be my old friend who, since earliest boyhood, had been to me like a brother?

"Of course," I said a little stiffly, "if you feel that way about it, I can put up at the inn. But I thought that because of our friendship and because we had not seen each other since your return from abroad, you would want me to stay here with you."

An expression of acute distress crossed his pale, esthetic features. "Don't take it that way, old fellow," he pleaded. "I do want you, more than you've any idea. But —I can't explain. . . ."

He seemed to be undergoing some inward struggle, that manifested itself in his twitching hands and trembling lips. At last:

"Very well," he said, almost in a tone of hopeless surrender; "since we both wish it, stay. But for the sake of our friendship, for the sake of all that you hold dear, promise me that you will be careful, and will do as I say."

His unusual behavior alarmed me. More, I did not like his exceeding paleness, nor his unnaturally bright eyes. He looked as if he was on the verge of both a mental and physical breakdown.

"Of course I'll promise, Victor," I said reassuringly, hoping to quiet him. "But what am I to be careful about, and what am I to promise?"

"You must be careful never to go out alone after nightfall," he answered promptly, "and never to eat anything in this house that has not been prepared by old Gregory. And you must promise to sleep every night with your door locked and bolted, and to open it to no one, not even to me."

Bewildered, but anxious to humor him, I promised; and he summoned Gregory, his servant since boyhood, to carry my bags to my room.

Gregory, old and faithful, seemed overjoyed to see me.

"I'm so glad you've come, Mr. Trevor!" he exclaimed as he laid out my clothes. "Master Victor needs a good friend to stand by him. He's not been himself at all lately."

"Perhaps the local mystery is getting on his nerves," I remarked, referring to a series of mysterious murders which had been terrorizing the countryside, and which I, as a journalist, had come to investigate.

Gregory shook his head. "I don't know, sir," he replied. "But it was before the murders that the master began to act queer. Before we came back here, even. It's been ever since he took up with that Doctor Gaspard."

I did not inquire who Doctor Gaspard was, although Gregory plainly wanted me to. If there was anything to be learned, I preferred to get it from Victor.

At dinner, I met Doctor Théophile Gaspard. Victor did not explain his presence; but I gathered that he was staying on indefinitely at the house. He was, in spite of his name, an Eurasian. His age might have been anything between thirty-five and fifty. He was slender and dark, with a scholarly forehead and eyes that were like black ice behind which a dull fire is ever smoldering. He was suave and courteous; and I felt strongly drawn to him, even while something in my inner consciousness cried out in protest against him.

All through dinner it was Gaspard

who did most of the talking. He was a clever and interesting conversationist; and he seemed, although by neither word nor gesture, to be making apology for our taciturn host. Victor, for his part, spoke not more than a half-dozen sentences during the meal. He ate almost nothing; but he drank a great deal of wine, which, however, had no more effect upon him than if it had been so much water.

"Victor tells me that you are a journalist," Gaspard remarked during the conversation. "I suppose you have come here to write up our recent murders?"

"Yes," I answered. "Unfortunately—or fortunately, as you may care to look at it—the public has a morbid thirst; and I have come here to do my part toward quenching it."

He smiled slightly. "Your metaphor has an appropriateness you probably did not intend, Mr. Trevor," he commented. "Did you know that in each case every drop of blood had been drained from the body of the unfortunate victim?"

"So it's true then!" I exclaimed with a journalist's interest. "I had heard something of the sort. There is also a rumor that in every instance the grave of the murdered man has been opened, and the body horribly mutilated. Is that also true?"

A dark flush overspread the doctor's face, and his eyes gleamed. "It is," he ground between clenched teeth. "Some meddling fool——" Then, seeing my look of surprize, he checked himself. "Always, during the night after the funeral," he continued in his normal tones, "the grave has been opened, and the body pinned to its coffin with an aspen stake driven through the heart. In one case, the head was cut off as well."

"That sounds like vampirism," I observed. "I've a notion to do a series of feature articles along that line to supplement my main story."

"Do you believe in vampires?" Gaspard inquired. Although his tone was casual, his question was not put with any light intent; and I realized that I was expected to answer seriously.

"No, I do not," I replied. "Living dead men—the term is a contradiction in itself; an impossibility."

Again he smiled, and for an instant the fire seemed to flare up more brightly behind the dark coldness of his eyes.

"In my country, our attitude toward such things is different," he said. "But there is a reason for that. It is the difference between knowledge bred by theoretical study, and knowledge arising from experience."

"What!" I exclaimed, politely skeptical. "Surely you don't mean that you——"

And then I stopped short, for my glance had fallen upon Victor. He was sitting huddled in his chair, with his head drawn down almost between his shoulders. His hands were clutching at the arms of his chair, about which his long white fingers writhed and twisted, as if they possessed an existence separate from the rest of him. His face was deathly white except for one hectic spot on either cheek; and his staring eyes were fixed upon Gaspard's face as if held there by fascinated horror.

"Most of my countrymen believe in vampires," the Eurasian went on, apparently unconscious of Victor's spellbound gaze; "the dead who yet are not dead; who live by sucking the blood from the bodies of living persons; whose mouths are red with the blood of their victims; and whose hearts, in those cases where the bodies were discovered and opened, were found to contain fresh, living blood."

I shuddered at the description, and

again my eyes sought Victor. At each repetition of the word "blood," he had recoiled as though from a physical blow; yet he made no outcry, nor any sign to interrupt the horrible recital. He was like a man on the brink of a precipice: terrified, yet hypnotized by the very terror of what he contemplates.

At last Gaspard seemed to become aware of him.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Victor!" he exclaimed in sudden and elaborate concern. "I had forgotten your distaste for such matters. Let us speak of things less gruesome." But in spite of his words of apology, I had a strong feeling that he had been consciously torturing his host.

Although we deliberately turned to the lightest of topics, the shadow of the bat, evoked by those few minutes' conversation, was still upon us. It was like the breath of foulness that lingers even after the cause of it has been removed.

THE last of a gorgeous sunset was flaming in the sky as we rose from the table. Victor looked at its ruddy reflection upon the ancient, discolored wainscot, and a violent shudder convulsed him.

"I'm afraid I must ask you to excuse me, Noel," he began, avoiding my eyes. "I—I've been ill lately, and I generally go to my room immediately after dinner."

"Why, of course, old man," I replied readily. "Run right along. Doctor Gaspard and I will entertain each other."

"Until tomorrow, then," he said, holding out his hand to me.

I took it, and was surprized to find how cold it was, like the hand of a dead man.

As he turned to leave the room, he caught sight of his own reflection in a long mirror, bathed, like everything else, in the lurid light of the sunset. He started, and passed his fingers across his cheek, as if he expected the color to come away upon them.

"Blood again," I heard him mutter hoarsely. "It's everywhere, and I can't escape it. Oh, my God!"

Gaspard and I went into the library, where we chatted inconsequentially for about an hour. But I saw that the doctor, although he was courteous enough, was not giving me his full attention. Presently he rose somewhat abruptly.

"Please excuse me a minute, Mr. Trevor," he requested. "Victor is my patient as well as my friend, and I would like to have a look at him."

Without waiting for my reply, he left the room.

While I was waiting for him to return, old Gregory looked in.

"I'm going to my room now, Mr. Trevor," he said. "Is there anything I can do for you before I go?"

I assured him that there was not, but he continued to linger.

"You'll be careful tonight; won't you, Mr. Trevor?" he asked diffidently.

"Careful?" I repeated, surprized. "What about, Gregory?"

"About locking your room, sir," he replied, sinking his voice almost to a whisper. "Queer things have been happening hereabouts, you know, and whatever happens, you mustn't open your door. Promise that you won't, Mr. Trevor."

Here was more mystery. I gave old Gregory the promise he desired, but refrained from questioning him; for, while it was plain that he definitely knew something, I feared that his account would be too garbled by an old servant's imaginings to be of any use to me. However, I resolved to make inquiries in some other quarters at the earliest opportunity.

In a minute or so, Gaspard returned.

"Victor is sleeping," he reported. "The rest will be good for him."

"What exactly is wrong with him, Doctor?" I asked bluntly.

"That is difficult to state precisely, Mr. Trevor," he replied silkily. "For one thing, his nerves are in a dreadful state—his occult studies, you know."

"No, I *don't* know," I said. "I was not aware that he was interested in the occult."

The Eurasian shrugged. "I fear that he is regretting his interest," he observed. "If I were you, I would not speak to him on the subject."

Was this a maneuver to forestall any attempt on my part to question Victor, I wondered? Suddenly I knew, with that intuitive sixth sense that is beyond ordinary, logical knowledge, that my friend's safety—more, his very life—was in danger. But I dared ask no more questions just then for fear of arousing this strange man's suspicions.

We talked on through the evening; or rather, the doctor talked and I listened. His soft, cultured voice seemed to slither through the atmosphere, like something at once beautiful and dangerous. The lamplight fell across his face without illumining it. It was like those beams of light which, thrown against the night sky, are seen as light themselves, but which are turned back, impotent; repelled and blunted by the unfathomable darkness and mystery which they have attempted to penetrate.

At last, by mutual consent, we rose and went to our rooms. My room was a spacious, high-ceilinged chamber toward the back of the house; one which I had often occupied during my visits to Victor when we were boys. Then it had seemed pleasant and interesting with its curious old furniture and mementoes of the past. But now . . .

Curious that I had never before noticed that atmosphere of moldering decay that pervaded it! As I set my lamp upon the table, its light brought out great, discolored patches upon the walls, like black, evil fungi that fed upon the more healthful portions of the room. I had the hideous impression that these splotches were growing; that some day they would cover everything; and then . . .

I went back to the door, and locked and bolted it, as Victor had instructed me. But I was not so sure that I had locked the evil out. It seemed to be all around me. It was as if something had brought to life all the ancient powers of malignity that had lain dormant in the very earth upon which the house was built, just as a malevolent influence calls forth the propensities for evil in a human character.

Slowly I undressed and got into bed. I would have to pull myself together, I decided as I turned out the lamp; I was becoming frightened by shadows. Something of Victor's hysteria must have communicated itself to me. If I was either to help him or do my own work decently, this sort of thing must stop. Repeating these thoughts again and again, I finally went to sleep.

When I awoke, the room was pitch-dark. The moon had set, and the feeble light of the stars was unable to penetrate through the dense foliage of the trees outside. The utter blackness was like something that could be touched and felt.

I sat up in bed and listened. Although all was silent now, I knew that some sound had awakened me. Then I heard it again; a stealthy, crawling sound, like a body that half drags, half gropes its way in the dark!

The thing was coming down the hall. It moved slowly, but with a deadly deliberation that was more alarming than any sudden rush could have been. There

was something awful about that creeping, monotonous approach. The thing, whatever it was, did not seek stealth; it simply moved quietly. Then a disconcerting realization flashed upon me: My room was at the end of the hall; the creature must be making for my door.

I reached for the little revolver which, before retiring, I had slipped under my pillow. But even as my fingers closed upon it, I knew that it would be useless against that thing out there in the darkness.

I thought of making a light; then hesitated. If I let it know that I had heard it, it would be on its guard. Better to let it think that I was unaware of its presence.

Now it was just outside my room. I could hear it brushing against the panels of the door. Then the knob began slowly to turn.

"Who's there?" I shouted without warning.

There was a pause; then:

"Noel, it's—it's Victor." It was a barely audible whisper.

Surprized and a little bewildered, I got out of bed. "Wait a minute," I called, "till I make a light."

"No, don't make a light!" The voice was a little louder this time, and nervously imperative. "Let me in."

Wondering, I groped my way to the door. My fumbling hand found the key and turned it, then felt for the bolt. As I touched the door, I could feel something pressing eagerly against it from the other side. And then, like letters of fire against that thick, smothering blackness that shrouded about me on all sides, Victor's words, spoken upon my arrival, flashed before me:

"You must promise to sleep with your door locked and bolted, and to open it to no one; *not even to me!*"

With my hand on the bolt, I hesitated. Could I be sure that it was Victor out there in the hall? I had heard only a whispering voice. Could this be what he had meant when he had uttered his strange warning?

"Hurry, Noel," the voice whispered. Its owner was now pressing with all his weight against the door.

Suddenly I knew that I must not obey that whispering voice; that the thing to which it belonged was inexpressibly evil. So long as the door remained firmly closed between us, I was safe; but as soon as I withdrew that bolt . . .

"Hurry," the voice repeated. "Let me in."

"No!" I cried, relocking the door instead. "You are not Victor Langland!"

There was a quavering, long-drawn sound, like a deep sigh; then silence. Trembling I returned to the bed and sat down upon its edge, keeping my revolver trained on the door. Again I heard the knob turning, but the locked door did not yield.

For over an hour, intermittent whinings and half-sobs sounded from the hall. More than once I suffered from grave misgivings: Suppose it *was* Victor out there, dangerously ill, and I was refusing to help him! But could my friend be making those weird, inhuman sounds? Racked by a host of emotions, I sat listening until at last the whimpering ceased. Then, convinced that the creature, whatever it was, had gone, I threw myself across the bed, to lie sleepless till daybreak.

THE next morning I had breakfast with Doctor Gaspard. Victor did not appear.

"He rarely comes down for breakfast," the Eurasian told me. "He does not sleep well during the night." And after an in-

appreciable pause, "You slept well, I hope, Mr. Trevor?"

I decided that subterfuge with this man would be useless. Accordingly, "No," I replied frankly; "on the contrary, I slept rather badly. In fact, I had the impression that some one or some *thing* was trying to get into my room."

I watched him narrowly as I said this in order to get his reaction. He merely raised his eyebrows in polite surprize.

"Really?" he said. "How strange! What did you do?"

"I didn't do anything," I replied; then I asked, "What would you have done?"

"I think I should have gone to see what it was," he answered. "Weren't you curious?"

"Yes," I admitted, "but I was also cautious. Remember, the thing that brought me here was a series of mysterious murders."

I thought his eyes flickered at that, but he said nothing.

Just then old Gregory came in with our breakfasts. He was quivering with excitement, not untinged with fright.

"Gentlemen, have you heard the news?" he gasped without waiting to be addressed. "There's been another one!"

Gaspard and I looked up sharply. "Another murder?" we exclaimed in a breath.

"Well, not exactly," he admitted, "but another attempt at one. It happened out near the grove again. Mr. Linton's car had broken down about five miles beyond, and he was walking home. This morning some men found him lying unconscious by the side of the road, with the same kind of wound in his throat as the others had. One of the men ran for a doctor; and Mr. Linton's been taken to the hospital."

"Do they think he'll live?" Gaspard demanded.

"They think so," Gregory answered, "although he's pretty weak from loss of blood."

Gaspard made no comment until Gregory had left us; then:

"I am a doctor," he said. "I think I shall call at the hospital, which, in this small place, is a very poorly equipped one, and see if there is anything that I can do for this poor man."

I saw my opportunity, and seized it. "Take me with you," I pleaded. "I promise that I will not be in the way. It is on account of these mysterious killings that I have come here."

He hesitated, and for a moment I thought he was going to refuse; but apparently he could think of no sufficient reason for doing so.

"Very well," he conceded. "But you must not take anything that Linton may say too seriously. The shock of what he has been through will probably have caused illusions."

WE ARRIVED at the hospital, and were admitted without difficulty to the wounded man's room. He was extremely weak, but seemed wholly rational when he answered our questions.

"I don't know what it was that attacked me," he said. "It sprang upon me from behind, and I was not able to see its face."

" 'It'?" Gaspard repeated quickly. "Then the police are right in thinking that it is some kind of animal?"

"I'm not sure," Linton answered thoughtfully. "It seemed inhuman enough, and yet it wore clothes, like a man. I had the impression of a long, black cloak, that flapped in the wind. Its hands, or claws, or whatever they were, were like steel: I couldn't even struggle, once they had caught hold of me. All I can remember is their clammy grip upon my throat, pull-

ing me over backward. Then I must have fainted."

"At approximately what time did this happen, Mr. Linton?" I inquired.

He considered. "It was nearly one by my dashboard clock when my car broke down," he replied thoughtfully. "I must have worked over the engine about half an hour before I decided to walk home. And since the car broke down about five miles from the grove—I guess it must have been between half past two and three o'clock."

"Thank you," I said, endeavoring to keep the tingle of excitement that had swept over me from showing itself in my voice. For by the radium dial of my watch, it had been five minutes past two when the Thing had quitted my door the night before. And I had already ascertained that the grove, where the near-tragedy had occurred, was within twenty minutes' walk of the house!

The hospital's resident physician, who was attending Linton, came into the room. "I'll have to ask you to go now," he said. "My patient is too weak to be allowed to talk longer."

He followed us out into the hall, and closed the door. "I have had a picture taken of the wound in Mr. Linton's neck," he told us. "Perhaps you would like to see it."

We both replied that we would, and he led the way to his office. Taking some photographic prints from an envelope, he spread them on the desk in front of us. They showed the angle of Linton's jaw, and a portion of his neck, with two lancet-like punctures just above the jugular vein. "Why!" I exclaimed, bending over them, "they look like teeth marks!"

"Exactly," the doctor nodded. "But the most horrible part is, the condition of the flesh around the wounds indicates that they have been sucked. It's revolting!"

"Were the others like that?" I inquired, referring to the four deaths that had occurred before my arrival.

"Yes," he nodded. "There is evidently some strange creature haunting the grove and the scattered cottages in its vicinity. The inexplicable thing is that searchers have been unable to find it."

Gaspard, who had remained silent up to this time, uttered a short, derisive laugh. "Of course they haven't found it," he said. "The thing is a night prowler, and remains well hidden during the daytime. If they expect to find it, they must search at night, when it is abroad."

I SPOKE little on the way back to the house, for I was formulating in my mind a plan that had been suggested to me by Gaspard's words.

On arriving at the house, we found that Victor had not yet come downstairs. This made me uneasy, for it was nearly noon; so, getting rid of the doctor under some pretext, I slipped upstairs to my friend's room.

My knock brought no response; but the door, which was unlatched, swung partly open under my hand. Through the aperture, I could see Victor lying upon the bed. He was not in his night-clothes, but was still wearing the clothing he had worn the evening before. Something in his appearance frightened me, and I went into the room.

I crossed to the bed, and looked down at him. His features were pale as death; and I could detect no movement of breathing. A horrible fear swept over me: Had I turned him away from my door last night, and had he come back here, sick and alone—to die? Almost in panic, I caught him by the shoulder.

"Victor!" I cried. "Victor, wake up! You must!"

A kind of shudder passed over him, and he opened his eyes.

"Thank God!" I exclaimed in relief. "I thought for a minute that you were dead."

He looked at me, and a strange expression crossed his face. "Dead?" he muttered. "I wish to heaven that I were, Noel!"

The utter hopelessness in his tone aroused the fighting instinct in me. "Stop talking such nonsense," I commanded sternly. "You've got to buck up, and get well."

He shook his head at this. "Noel," he said in that same despairing voice, "as much as I want you here, I want your safety even more. Won't you go away?"

"What for?" I demanded bluntly.

"There's danger."

"If there's danger for me, there's danger for you," I pointed out. "Will you go with me?"

"I—I can't," he groaned.

"Then neither can I," I retorted, determined. "I had one reason for coming here—my work; but now I have two for staying—my work and you. I don't know in what way you've got entangled in this mystery, Victor; but I'm convinced that you have, and I'm going to see you through."

He made a pitiful effort to smile. "What am I going to do with you?" he asked; and while his tone was light, I saw that the question was really troubling him.

As the day wore on, I completed and perfected the plan that had occurred to me in the morning. It was this: All four of the inexplicable deaths, as well as the attack upon Linton, had taken place in or around a place called the grove, a small, tree-covered tract about the size of a city block; a pleasant enough locality by day, but by night a dark, silent, and sinister-seeming spot. This grove was surrounded on three sides by a loop of the river, and on the fourth by a stretch of lonely road. A few scattered cottages were the nearest habitations to it; and after them, the old Langland house. It was my intention to go there after nightfall, and conceal myself among the underbrush on the side of the road opposite the grove, to await the coming of the Thing. I felt that I would be in little danger so long as my presence was unknown. Also, I would be armed with a powerful flashlight and my revolver. I had no wish to try to capture the thing, only to get a glimpse of it.

I WAITED until I felt fairly certain that Victor and Gaspard were in bed and asleep that night; then I let myself out at a side window, and sprinted at top speed toward the grove. The moon was up, and I had no difficulty in finding my way, although its presence permitted me to be seen as well as to see. Still, this caused me little alarm, since apparently the Thing did not begin its prowlings until after the moon had set. Only one thing disturbed me: As I had left the house, I had an unaccountable sensation that unseen eyes were watching me, although I had heard no sound and detected no movement in the surrounding shadows.

Arrived at the grove, I found a suitable hiding-place, and concealed myself. About forty feet to my left was a one-story, wooden cottage, deserted since the day when one of its two inmates had been found dead in his bed, the second victim of the mysterious killer. On my right was a sweep of rough, uncultivated land, covered with a heavy growth of weeds and scrub-locust. And in front of me was the grove.

I fitted my body into a depression in the earth, and with the scrub-locust concealing me, settled down to wait. The road wound shimmering by in the moonlight, while on its farther side the black pines whispered furtively to one another. The night was still and warm, with only the voices of little, summer night creatures and the hushed rustling of the trees to break the silence. I felt the peace of the place stealing over me, bringing with it a pleasant drowsiness. In order to drive this off, I took out my notebook and pencil, and began to scribble down impressions. The moonlight was so bright that I could see easily to do this.

The page grew gradually dimmer before my eyes, so that I had difficulty in writing. This meant that the moon was setting. I put away my notebook, and glanced up and down the road. There was no one in sight, nor could I detect any sign of movement in the grove. A glance at my watch told me that it was one-thirty. It would soon be time for something to happen.

But nothing did. Minutes dragged on, and the peace of the night was undisturbed. I began to wonder whether perhaps the Thing did not walk every night. In that case I would have to repeat my vigil until it met with success. Well, I would wait until three o'clock; and if nothing had happened by that time——

With an abruptness that had in it a sense of shock, the noises of the crickets and locusts around me ceased. Utter silence was added to the utter blackness that now enveloped the scene. I could neither see nor hear.

I strained my senses toward the grove opposite. Apparently there was nothing there. Cautiously raising myself to a sitting posture, I crouched with revolver drawn, while my left hand gripped my flashlight. At the first dim sight or sound, I was prepared to send a beam of powerful white light in its direction. But the silence was painful, and the only visible thing was the faintly glowing dial of my wrist-watch, like a circle of pale, phosphorescent fire in the surrounding darkness. My ears and eyes ached with the intensity of the black and silent void.

And then, behind me, a twig snapped.

In an instant I had whirled around and pressed the button of my flashlight. Behind me was the Thing!

It was crouching not ten feet from me, a black, shapeless mass in which I could recognize neither man nor beast. As I looked, a kind of quiver passed over it, and I knew that in another minute it would spring.

With a yell of fear, I leaped to the road and started down it in mad flight. A crash in the underbrush behind me told me that I had been not a moment too soon; and then came the blood-chilling sound of pursuing footsteps.

I fled with the speed of terror, but always behind me sounded those inexorable footfalls. Once I dared to look round and flash my light behind me. The creature was running upright, like a man, but with its head bent forward so that its face was hidden by the broad brim of its hat. A long, black cloak billowed out behind it, like the leathery wings of a bat. At that instant, I knew that the Thing was not human, but was a monstrosity, something that should have perished with the Dark Ages. I extinguished my light, and fled on.

After what seemed an eternity of nightmare horror, the feel of flag-stones beneath my feet told me that I was nearing the Langland house. Again turning on my light, I saw the twin hedgerows leading to its entrance directly in front of me. With a sob of thankfulness, I turned in between them.

But I was not yet safe. Just when I had almost reached the house, something that lay across the path seemed to twine itself about my foot, and I stumbled. As I pitched forward, I heard once more those ominous footsteps, this time almost upon me. Then my head struck the ground, and I lost consciousness. . . .

When I opened my eyes, I was lying upon a couch in a room that I had never seen before. Except for the couch, a long, porcelain-topped table, and two chairs, the room was unfurnished; but its walls were lined with shelves and glass-fronted cupboards, both filled with various-sized bottles. The sunlight, entering almost vertically at the eastern windows, apprised me that it was nearly noon.

I tried to turn my head to look around, but an instant, sharp stab of pain caused me to groan aloud. At that, there was a movement behind me, and Doctor Gaspard came into view.

"How are you feeling?" he asked, taking my hand and feeling for my pulse.

"Rotten," I answered thickly. "How did I get here?"

"I brought you," he replied. "I found you lying on the walk in front of the house. You must have gone out for an early morning walk, and had a fainting-spell. I carried you here to my workroom, where I could attend to your injuries."

I sat up, regardless of the agony in my head.

"What injuries have I?" I demanded. "When did you find me? Was there any one else around?"

He smiled at my excitement.

"The only injury that I could find," he told me, carefully answering my questions in turn, "is a case of slight concussion resulting from a severe blow on the right side of the frontal bone, attended by a small scalp abrasion. It was just at daylight that I chanced to look out of my window and see you. There was no other person around."

"Were there no other marks on me?" I persisted. "No mark on my throat, for instance, such as there was on Linton's?"

"Aha!" he exclaimed with a playfulness that seemed to have a touch of ghoulish relish to it. "So you were out looking for the vampire last night!"

His frank use of that horrible word revolted me, and I remained silent. He turned his back upon me, and went over to a cabinet, from which he took a bottle containing a white powder.

"I suppose you were keeping vigil at the grove," he commented as he mixed some of this powder with water in a glass. "Did you see anything?"

"I saw a man-like creature in a black cloak, which pursued me back to the house," I answered with a frankness intended to match his own. "It was nearly upon me when I stumbled and fell."

"What time was this?" he asked, as casually as if we had been discussing some commonplace.

"It must have been nearly four o'clock," I replied. "The eastern sky was beginning to turn gray."

"It was that which saved you," he informed me. "With the coming of dawn, the vampire must return to its grave."

He finished stirring the mixture in the glass, and brought it over to me. "Drink this," he directed.

Mechanically I took the glass from him, but paused with it half-way to my lips. "What is it?" I demanded suspiciously.

He smiled openly at my caution. "Only something that will relieve your headache," he replied. "It will not hurt you."

I looked at the white liquid in the glass, and felt a little foolish. It was unlikely that the man would deliberately try to

murder me. Besides, I suddenly realized, I had no legitimate reason for believing him to be a villain; only a groundless dislike. I raised the glass to drink.

At that moment, the door was flung violently open, and Victor staggered into the room. He was white to the lips, and trembling so he could hardly stand.

"Noel!" he cried, catching sight of me. "Thank heaven you are not seriously hurt! Gregory told me——"

He rushed over to the couch and in his nervousness and excitement, knocked the glass from my hand, spilling its contents over both of us.

Gaspard flushed with anger, and muttered something in a language I could not understand.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Victor apologized, but there was no contrition in his tone. "Let me help you to your room, Noel, so that you can get into some dry things."

Gaspard made no effort to interfere; so we went together to my room.

"Now," I demanded, as I exchanged my medicine-stained shirt for a clean one, "why did you knock that glass out of my hand?"

He glanced involuntarily toward the closed door before replying; then: "Remember," he said hurriedly in lowered tones, "what I told you: You must not eat or drink anything here unless Gregory prepares it."

"But why?" I persisted. "And why all this mystery, Victor?"

He seemed to be struggling for speech, but at last gave it up hopelessly. "I can't explain, Noel," he said, "but you must do as I say."

"Look here," I exclaimed recklessly, determined to get to the bottom of the matter if it were at all possible, "has Gaspard got some hold upon you, and is he experimenting upon you with some of his refined Eastern tortures? And what has he got to do with——"

I was interrupted by a gentle knock at the door. At the sound, Victor's eyes dilated with terror, and he collapsed into a chair.

"Who is there?" I called.

"Gaspard," answered the soft, cultured voice of the doctor. "May I come in?"

I gave my consent, and he entered the room.

"I have been wondering," he began without preliminary, "whether it would not be advisable for you to spend the day lying down. You have suffered a severe blow upon the head; you will need rest."

There was, I realized, a great deal of truth in what he said. I still felt sick and dizzy, and had needed the support of Victor's arm to reach my room.

"All right," I assented, not unwillingly. "I will lie down, for a while, at least."

About an hour later, Gregory brought me a light lunch, which he said he had prepared for me at the doctor's direction. After I had eaten and he had taken away the tray, Victor came in.

"I've come to sit with you," he announced.

"Thanks awfully, old man," I replied gratefully. "But you needn't unless you want to, you know. I'll be all right."

"I *do* want to," he replied briefly, and sat down by the window.

He spoke little during his self-imposed vigil; and for this I was, in a way, grateful. The reaction from my accident had begun to set in. I suddenly realized that I was very weak and very much in need of the rest which the doctor had prescribed.

At dinnertime I refused the tray which old Gregory brought up to me. Victor, too, declared that he was not hungry, and

instead of going down to join Gaspard, chose to stay with me.

"I say, this won't do, old fellow," I remonstrated with him. "Why, you have eaten hardly anything since I have been here."

He turned my solicitude aside with some evasive remark, and in order to pacify me, let Gregory bring him a biscuit and a glass of wine. But I noticed that he did not touch the biscuit, and only sipped at the wine.

As dusk came on, he began to grow restive. His fingers strummed nervously upon the arms of his chair, and he seemed barely able to sit still. At last he rose abruptly.

"I'll have to go, Noel," he said without looking at me. "Be careful tonight—and remember what I told you about locking the door."

"I will," I assured him. "Good-night, Victor."

I held out my hand to him. He did not take it, although I knew that he was fully aware of it.

"Good-night," he muttered, still without looking at me, and was gone from the room.

The door had scarcely closed behind him when it was opened again by Gaspard. "How do you feel, Mr. Trevor?" he inquired in the softly modulated tones of the physician.

"Better," I replied, then added, to see the effect upon him, "Victor has stayed with me all day."

He showed no surprize. "Victor is a fine young man," he said. "I wish I could do more for him."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"His is a peculiar case," he went on. "He is suffering from a nervous disorder that has resulted in a strange phobia; he is afraid of every one who comes near him after nightfall. I suppose he left you just now as it began to grow dark?"

"Yes, he did," I admitted.

"That is an instance of the phobia," he said. "Probably when you first came, he asked you to go away. Poor fellow! he is even afraid of me, simply because I am with him all the time. He is so afraid that he will not take my medicines; yet he will not consult any other doctor, as I have suggested many times that he should do."

He was busy taking my pulse and temperature as he told me these things, and seemed not to expect an answer; so I gave him none. I was both astounded and bewildered by what he had said. Could this be the simple explanation of the mystery surrounding Victor's behavior, whereas I had been looking for something more sinister? Had I been unfairly prejudiced against Doctor Gaspard, simply because of his nationality?

"I suppose the series of mysterious murders are partly responsible for this night-phobia," I ventured finally.

"Undoubtedly," he replied, "but they were not the beginning of it. As I hinted to you before, his recent occult studies proved too much for him."

At another time I would have seized eagerly at the opportunity to inquire into the nature of these occult studies, but this was not the time. I was still feeling the effects of my adventure of the night before; my nerves as well as my legs were unsteady. I was decidedly not in a state to make inquiries into mediæval magic and superstitions.

Gaspard chatted a few minutes longer, adroitly steering the conversation to subjects less likely to harass the imagination of a sick man. At last he rose to leave.

"You are coming along nicely," he said. "Try to sleep tonight, and you will be all right in the morning."

He moved toward the door. I sat up

on the side of the bed, preparatory to turning the key in the lock behind him. Seeing me, he stopped.

"Don't get up," he advised quickly. "If you do, you'll find yourself less steady on your feet than you think." Then a sudden light of understanding seemed to dawn upon him. "Ah, yes, of course!" he exclaimed. "Victor must have made you promise to lock yourself in. Well, I will lock the door for you from the outside, and toss the key over the transom. Will that serve?"

I replied that it would; and, wishing me good-night, he removed the key from the inner side of the door, and took it with him. A moment later I heard the metallic sound of it being turned in the lock; then it shot in a bright arc through the open transom, and landed with a tiny thud in the middle of the floor. I turned out my lamp, and prepared to go to sleep, feeling more secure than I had felt at any time since my arrival. . . .

For the second time, I awoke amid pitch-blackness, dragged back to consciousness by that curious, groping sound in the hall. But this time, instead of being instantly broad awake, with all my senses on the alert, I seemed to be struggling up through heavy waves of oblivion, that were pressing down upon me, trying to smother me back again into unconsciousness.

The groping sounds were much nearer this time than they had been when I had first heard them two nights before. I lay listening to them, fighting down a feeling of unreality, and thanking heaven that the door between me and the Thing was locked. Then a sudden realization smote me: Gaspard's explanations, while they accounted for Victor's strange behavior, had *not* accounted for the presence of the Thing!

With the thought, new horrors and speculations smote me. If the doctor knew, why had he not told me; and if he did not know—— Victor knew, I felt sure; and it was against the Thing that he had tried to warn me. I could hear it just outside the door. Now it was fumbling with the knob. And with that, I knew for a certainty what I had only suspected before: The Thing out there in the hall was the vampire killer of the grove!

At the realization, I became wet with cold perspiration. I could feel the short hairs rise at the back of my neck. I strained my ears for some sound to tell me what the creature was doing, but could hear none. Perhaps, I thought, clutching eagerly at the idea, it had gone away. But I had not heard it go. And then I became conscious of a cold draft blowing over me, a draft that was coming from the direction of the door!

With a horrible sickening of all my senses, I realized that the door was open, that Gaspard never had locked it! He betrayed me to the Thing!

I tried to move, to cry out; but I was like a man in a nightmare, weighed down and stifled by an intangible heaviness that permeated my entire physical being. My heart was beating with great, pounding blows that threatened to burst it; it was as if every ounce of strength in my body had gone into its intolerable thumping.

I strained my eyeballs into the darkness. If I could only see the Thing! All I knew was that it was somewhere in the room with me; we two hemmed in together, yet separated by the thick blackness. If I could only know from what quarter——

There was a rustle at the side of my bed. Two icy, talon-like hands gripped my throat; and I fainted. . . .

There was a sound of rushing waters in my ears, through which I was fighting desperately for consciousness. Somewhere, far away above the dark waters, were light and sounds; and toward these I strove.

Gradually, as the waters subsided or as I gained mastery over them, the light resolved itself into the glow of a lamp upon the table of Gaspard's workroom, and the sounds, first into voices, then into words.

I lay with half-closed eyes, listening to these words, which, unintelligible at first, presently began to take on meaning.

". . . and if you do, by God, I'll kill you!" declared one of the voices, which with a start I recognized as Victor's. "I mean it."

The other voice, Gaspard's, laughed softly. "You excite yourself over nothing," it replied in the tone of one who reasons with a rebellious child. "The state is not painful; you must admit that. And think of its advantages. All I ask in return is allegiance to me; forced, I'll grant, but I am not a hard master. If you would forget your apprehensiveness and appreciate your situation——"

"Stop!" Victor broke in. "I have sworn that you shall not do this thing to Noel, and you shall not! I——"

"Enough!" Gaspard turned upon him the fatal, fixed stare of the hooded cobra. His voice was deadly quiet. "I am your master. You will do as I say, and will not rebel against me. Now go."

Beneath that hard, cold eye, Victor wilted. Like a whipped dog, he turned and slunk from the room.

GASPARD looked after him and shrugged; then he crossed to the couch where I lay.

"Ah, you are conscious!" he exclaimed. "That is good! I had begun to fear—but I will give you some medicine, and all will be well. You must lie still now, perfectly still, and do not try to think. I will get the medicine; just a little white powder in a glass of water. . . ."

His voice was soothing and monotonous, and while he talked, he gazed steadily into my eyes. I stared back, unable to look away. In those few seconds, Victor and all else was forgotten. There was only the doctor's will, swaying me and molding me as it chose.

Satisfied that the partial hypnotism would hold me helpless, he left me, and, crossing to one of the cabinets, took down the bottle which he had taken from it the day before. I watched him with a casual kind of interest. The whole thing seemed unreal, a kind of melodrama, in which one part of me played a minor role, while another part looked on as spectator.

Gaspard began to return to me, stirring some of the white powder in a glass of water as he came. Something deep down in my consciousness tried to sound a warning against him and his medicine; but already it was too late. I knew that, powerless against him, I would swallow the contents of the glass, even if it meant my death.

Then I became aware of something else: The door at the doctor's back was slowly opening! In a few seconds it had swung wide enough to admit Victor, who stood pale and resolute on the threshold. He was holding some dull, metallic object in his hand, and his eyes were fixed unwaveringly upon Gaspard. Carefully deliberate, he began to raise the hand that held the metallic object. . . .

Gaspard had reached my side. "You will drink this," he was saying in that soft, persistent voice that seemed to smother my will. "Drink it, and be one of my company. It means power, Noel; power beyond anything you have ever imagined. That is right; take it. . . ."

My fingers reached for and closed around the glass. In a kind of daze, I raised it to my lips. . . .

From the other side of the room sounded a sharp report, accompanied by a spurt of red flame. Doctor Gaspard pitched forward, shot through the heart!

I let the glass crash to the floor, and sprang to my feet. The spell was broken; save for a slight dizziness and a feeling of weakness, I was my own man again. Victor stood facing me, still holding the revolver.

I looked from him to the dead man upon the floor. "You've murdered him!" I cried in horror.

"Yes," Victor said. "It had to be his life or yours."

"You mean—he would have killed me?" I demanded incredulously.

"Worse than that," he replied. "Feel your throat."

I obeyed. Just over the jugular vein was a small surgical dressing, held in place by a strip of plaster. I knew what type of wound lay beneath it.

"Merciful heaven!" I exclaimed. "Then he was the vampire killer!"

Victor smiled, but it was a horrible, ironic kind of smile. "Do you suppose that any vampire could be slain so easily with an ordinary bullet?" he asked bitterly. "No, he was not the killer. I am."

"What?" I cried aghast. "Victor, you don't know what you're saying!"

"I know only too well," he replied. "I realize what you are thinking: You believe that I have lost my reason; but, unhappily, it is not so.

"Two years ago, while I was in the Caucasus studying the survival of mediæval magic, I met Théophile Gaspard. He, too, was a student of my subject, but advanced so far beyond me that he seemed like a master by comparison. We became friends, and he offered to teach me what he knew. That was the first step along the road to my destruction.

"I had known him about three months, when one evening he confided to me that he had discovered the secret of immortality. At first I thought he was joking, but his manner soon convinced me that he was in earnest. He told me that it was not contained in an elixir, as was generally supposed, but in a white powder which, taken between two slight surgical operations, would render a man immortal. He then asked me whether I wanted to undergo the treatment.

"Naturally, I inquired whether he had made himself immortal, and when he replied that he had not, I laughed at him. He hastened to explain that, because of the surgical end of it, it was impossible for him to treat himself, but I was still skeptical. We argued upon the subject for half the night, and at last he flecked me upon the raw by accusing me of cowardice. Nettled, I told him that I would undergo his treatment, to prove both that I was not a coward and that his great discovery was a piece of absurdity.

"I know I was a fool to permit myself to be taunted into submission to his will, but it is too late to grieve over that now. That very night he etherized me for the first 'operation.' When I returned to consciousness, I suffered from no ill effects except a languid weakness. Also, I discovered on my neck a small surgical dressing.

"When he saw that I was conscious, he mixed some of his white powder in water, and made me drink it. The following night he put me to sleep by hypnosis.

"When I awoke from the hypnotic trance, the feeling of weakness had departed. I had no pain, but I experienced an indescribable feeling of change. I also

discovered before long that I no longer possessed a will of my own, but was wholly subservient to Gaspard.

"Then there developed the strange situation concerning food. I found I could not eat; yet every day I awoke with the feeling that I had eaten a full meal only a short time before. There was also the peculiarity of my sleeping. As darkness came on, I felt growing upon me a sense of unreality, not through any feeling of drowsiness, but rather through an abnormal wakefulness; a consciousness grown so acute that ordinary perceptions took on the phantom aspect of dreams. When I went to sleep, I do not know; but I never awoke before noon of the following day.

"Finally I determined to ask Gaspard about these things. He only smiled at my questions at first, and gave me evasive replies; but when I persisted, he told me all, and took a fiendish delight in telling: With the 'operations' and his white powder, he had made me into a vampire, a living dead man!"

VICTOR paused, overcome with the horror of his own story. I ventured a question.

"But how?" I asked. "How did he do this unspeakable thing?"

"I can only surmise from what he drove me to do afterward," Victor replied. "I have no memory of my attacks upon the poor creatures from whom I drew my sustenance. It was Gaspard's horrible plan that these, becoming vampires in their turn, should be chained to him as I was; but this, at least, I was able to prevent. Always, after they had been committed to the grave, old Gregory, acting on instructions whose import he only half understood, would open the coffin and drive an aspen stake through the heart of the corpse, or cut off its head; and so each living dead man of my making was set free from his revolting bondage.

"What Gaspard used for the 'operations' in my case, I don't know. Whether he used a giant blood-sucking bat, or whether—but it does not matter. His powder was the most devilish touch of all; for it not only sapped my will, binding me to him like a slave, but it made me, between the hours of noon and sundown, like any normal, living man, fully conscious of the horror of my situation. Nature has given to the soul of the ordinary vampire merciful unconsciousness of its hideous deeds: I was denied even that.

"Gaspard told me that we would not be able to remain in the Caucasus; that we would be suspected, and hunted down like dogs. So we fled across Europe, leaving behind us a trail of mysterious deaths, and at last came here, where he hoped to establish a whole colony of undead, by whose labors he would gain power and wealth. He planned to lure men here to destroy them; but I struggled against this with what little will remained to me. Then you came, Noel, and he very nearly succeeded."

He stopped speaking, and stared down at the dead man who lay between us. I, in turn, stared at him. The story he had just told me was, of course, the wild imaginings of an unbalanced mind. Perhaps Gaspard was in some way responsible for his condition; but a few months in a good sanitarium——

He looked up quickly, and apparently read my thoughts in my eyes.

"So you still think I am mad?" he asked wearily. "Perhaps that is not to be wondered at, although the wound in your throat should convince you. . . . You must try to forgive me for that, Noel; I could not help myself."

He glanced toward one of the win-

dows, where the darkness of night crowded against the pane.

"You must go now," he said. "Night is already here; and soon——"

I rose, and placed my hand upon his shoulder. "You must brace up," I commanded sternly. "Gaspard is dead now, and his influence over you is gone."

"Yes," he admitted grimly; "his influence over me is gone. But I am still the thing of horror which he has made me. You don't believe? Feel."

He drew my hand from his shoulder, and placed it over his breast. The next instant I recoiled in horror. *There was no heart-beat beneath my fingers!*

In a flash, all the indicative horrors of the past few days shot like an express train before my mental vision: the death-like coldness of Victor's hands, his disinclination to eat normal food, his withdrawal at nightfall, and above all, the terrible, deathly trance in which I had found him that first morning after my arrival.

I staggered back, aghast, and with the movement my body collided with the table and overturned the lamp. There was a sharp explosion as the lamp burst, and the streaming oil became ignited. As if by magic, flames shot up on all sides, fed by the dry, rotting wood of the old house and by the inflammable chemicals on the doctor's shelves.

HALF suffocated by the heavy smoke that curled like a great black serpent through the red fire, I stumbled toward the door. As I reached it, my arm was seized in a firm, supporting grip, and I was dragged, blinded and choking, out of the house and to a safe distance beyond, where I collapsed weakly upon the ground.

"Are you all right, sir?" a voice inquired solicitously.

I looked up with smoke-stung eyes, and for the first time realized that my rescuer had been old Gregory. Then my gaze traveled beyond him to where a raging inferno, that had lately been the Langland house, stained the black night sky a deep blood-red.

Forgetting my pain and weakness, I scrambled to my feet.

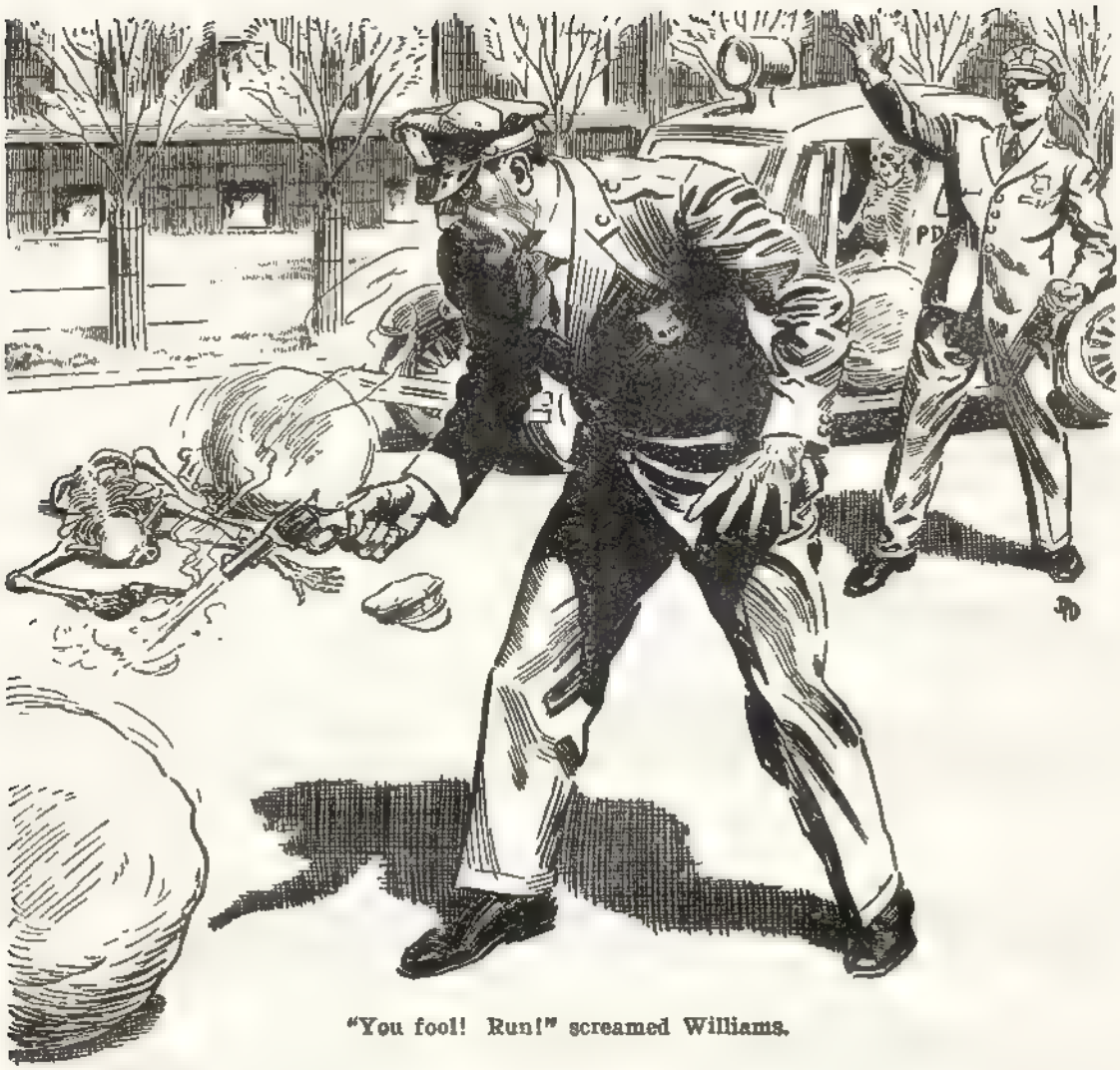
"Victor!" I cried wildly, and would have rushed toward that holocaust. "He is in there!"

But Gregory laid a restraining hand upon my arm.

"It is no use, Mr. Trevor," he said quietingly. "He is beyond our reach now. And he wished it so, I know. Think a minute, sir: There are worse things than good, clean fire."

"What do you mean?" I asked, pausing.

"He was still what that wicked doctor had made him," the old man explained. "I couldn't do for him as I did for the others, although he often begged me to. And the only other way was cremation—destruction of the body by fire. His poor soul is at rest now, Mr. Trevor; it is the only way he could be freed."



"You fool! Run!" screamed Williams.

The Destroying Horde

By DONALD WANDREI

A tale of giant one-celled organisms spawned in a chemist's laboratory, and an orgy of hideous death

OFFICER BERT WILLIAMS thought what a beautiful spring morning this was, as he attended to his usual duties. He had for some months been given a special assignment at the state university. It was he who tagged cars that had overparked the time limit of one hour, saw that student spirits did not become too combative, and kept watch for signs that the name of the Eighteenth Amendment was not being taken in vain.

As he strolled along the campus, which was situated near the geographical center

of two adjacent cities, and distributed tags where he felt that they would improve the car-owners' memories, he was also thinking what a comparatively monotonous life he led. The student body was a peaceful lot, hold-ups had been few, gangster and racketeering activities never approached the university grounds. So far as his work was concerned, he might just as well have been assigned to traffic duty.

Still, it was a warm, sunny morning, and he felt the fever of spring. A few students sauntered casually by. A squirrel frisked around the ornamental oak-trees with lively purpose. Birds chattered excitedly where an unseen nest was probably about to be raided. The south wind blew gently with the breath of quickening life. The world was wakening from the long sleep of winter, and a drowsy restlessness pervaded all organic life.

Officer Williams continued his leisurely pace down the row of cars illegally parked in front of the chemistry building until he had reached the end of the line, which was also the end of the block. Across the street stood the animal biology building, toward which his duties would next take him. He waited while several automobiles and a street-car clattered past, then took a step forward.

From the building came at that precise moment a shrill cry of torment, chilling and startling in the otherwise peaceful scene, a cry of nerve-tearing anguish.

"What the heck!" growled Officer Williams. "Sounds like somebody was gettin' killed." He dashed across the street—and at the very curb skidded to a sudden halt with his eyes bulging.

From an open window on the second floor, a great, roundish, jelly-like thing, the size of a bushel basket, had emerged and was clinging to the sill. As the policeman stared at it in consternation, it slid over the edge of the sill and half dropped, half crawled to the ground down the side of the building.

"That's a rum-lookin' animal," Officer Williams muttered. "Never saw anythin' like it before. What's it gonna do?" He eyed the object with a watchful and slightly apprehensive gaze.

He didn't have long to wait before obtaining an altogether too clear idea of what the curious beast was going to do. For barely an instant he was able to survey it while it lay supine a dozen yards away from him on the grass next the animal biology building. It had a kind of iridescent shimmer, and seemed semi-liquid, or like a jelly-fish in consistency, thick and viscid. It was approximately spherical, seemed to possess no limbs or appendages, and looked a kind of pale, dirty gray in color, with a faint tinge of rose suffusing its mass.

Officer Williams had no time to pursue his scrutiny further. The object suddenly began rolling or crawling toward him, he couldn't decide which, at a disconcertingly rapid pace.

"Oh-ho, my fine beast, so that's your game?" he said. "Well, here's one for you and I hope you like it." He drew out his service gun, took quick aim, and fired.

The bullet plopped into and through the thing. The hole it had ripped promptly closed, and without a falter in its progress the mass flowed on toward the policeman. He emptied his gun into it vainly. The substance was only a couple of yards from him when it dawned on him that it might be wise to get out of its way.

His action was characteristic. Instead of turning to flee, he bounded high over and beyond the object, racing onward a dozen paces and reloading his gun as he ran. Then he cast a swift glance over his shoulder, and spun around with a gasp of horror.

Attracted by the sound of shots, people were craning out of windows, and passing autos slowed to a stop. But the policeman's eyes were fixed on the co-ed who had stepped around the corner of the animal biology building, unwittingly into the path of the spheroid mass at the moment when he had fired.

A blank look transformed her features and she fainted. The object rolled toward her, and upon her. There was a curious contraction and quivering of the heap. Visibly, before the policeman's eyes, the limp body was absorbed, consumed, digested, by the creature.

A kind of fury shook Williams and again he emptied his revolver into the heap. The bullets plowed through without effect. A crimson tint grew more pronounced in the gluey pile; it swelled to larger dimensions while a kindly darkness lay upon the unknown girl who had gone blankly to a hideous death.

The officer shook himself from his daze. Could this nightmare actually be happening in the broad light of day, and on the finest morning of spring? Automatically he reloaded his useless weapon —and gasped as an incredible thing happened.

The doubly large substance stirred and moved away, leaving a gruesomely white skeleton behind it. For a moment the thing shook strangely, contracted in its middle, and abruptly separated into two segments. Where there had been one object before, two spheres now rolled silently and grimly away.

As though that were the signal that released a general hypnotism of terror, babel broke out and wild confusion reigned. The heads disappeared from windows, automobiles roared into life, doors banged, excited cries pierced the air, and above all came another tormented scream.

A TREMOR of indecision held Williams motionless for an instant as the voices of humanity and duty both called. There were people inside the building who could help him who had cried out, he thought. Duty won.

He raced to the station box a block away and almost ripped the 'phone out in his haste. "Williams, No. 49, callin'," he stuttered. "Strange animal loose at the state university. Already killed one girl. Bullets don't stop it. Send out the radio cars and riot squads at once. Rope off the whole district and for God's sake hurry!" He banged the box-door shut without waiting for official confirmation or even hearing the bored voice that remarked, "Better lay off that stuff while you're on duty!"

There was no sight of the two sinister shapes as he sped back to the animal biology building. They had disappeared somewhere, nor had any courageous person yet come to cover the pitifully white skeleton lying on the grass. But the living demanded greater attention than the dead, and Williams tore around the building's corner and took the steps at a leap, almost bursting through the doors in his haste.

"Second floor!" some one shouted as he entered. He made his way toward the main stairway but he did not reach the second floor.

A little cavalcade was descending the stairs. Three students and a young instructor, all white-faced and shaken, bore a limp burden between them.

Before Williams could utter a word, one of the bearers spoke out. "No time to talk now, officer. This man is badly hurt and we've got to get him to the U. hospital before he dies from loss of blood."

"Who is he? What's happened?"

"Professor Anscot of the biology de-

partment. We don't know what happened."

Williams followed the group as it hastened toward the hospital two blocks distant. On the way he surveyed the burden that the men carried, and again he felt an inner turning of his stomach. Professor Anscot was a slender, gray-haired man of perhaps fifty, with the intellectual features of an ascetic, and yet with the finely molded contours also which indicated a sensitivity to ultimate values. What sickened Williams were his legs. From the thigh down they had been stripped of every fragment of flesh. Only the bones remained, raw and starkly whitish. Above the knee they were stained by trickles of red that still oozed from the fleshy stumps around which rude tourniquets had been twisted.

The pallor on his face indicated how dangerous were his wounds and how much he suffered from loss of blood, but his head shook feebly, nervously, and he moaned unintelligible words although consciousness had left him. As Williams' eyes took in his slender hands that hung limp and his spare frame, he thought, "By the looks of it he's a goner. It'd take a pretty tough man to come out of *that*, but I miss my guess if he's got any reserves."

All the while that he followed the gruesome burden, he kept a watch for further signs of the predatory beasts. Instinct held him in constant readiness for any emergency even though he knew that his revolver would be useless. Again he was torn by conflicting desires. His place was back there where the things were. Yet he had a hunch that the disaster would be explained if Anscot could be made to talk.

Williams had a good head for putting facts together and seeing how they formed a sequence. Animals the like of which no one on earth so far as he knew had ever before seen do not as a general rule suddenly materialize out of nothing on spring mornings. The beast had unquestionably emerged from the animal biology building—with his own eyes he saw it come. Some one within must have possessed it or been responsible for it. The chances were that the owner was Anscot, because of his eminent position and because the building was under his supervision. It was Anscot who had screamed, and Williams knew to a certainty, as he looked at the fleshless legs, why he had screamed and what had caused the terrible mutilation.

At any rate, Anscot was the likeliest person who might be able to explain the mystery—if he lived to talk. If he didn't, well . . . Williams shrugged his shoulders.

Were there more of the strange spheres? Or had he seen the only one? Was it capable of disjointing and rejointing itself, or had it split into halves for good?

Williams breathed easier when the group arrived at the hospital without having sighted the unknown creature. In the receiving-ward, a cluster of staff surgeons immediately surrounded the unconscious professor and rushed him to the operating-rooms, in an almost hopeless attempt to save his life.

"How long will it be before they're through with him?" he asked the nurse in charge.

She looked up from the report that she was busily filling out. "Amputation of both legs, suture of veins and arteries, dressing and bandaging. . . . With Doctors Colby and Warren together working on the case, an hour at the very earliest."

An hour was too precious to waste in waiting now. Williams grabbed a tel-

ephone and put through a call to headquarters.

"Williams callin' from the university hospital," he spoke rapidly. "Have the nearest radio squad stop and pick me up."

In barely two minutes the official car drew in.

"The police department is takin' charge. I'll be back in an hour. Allow Anscot no visitors until we've talked to him," he commanded the head nurse. With that he dashed out. Before the radio squad came to a full halt he had pulled open the door and entered. The car picked up speed and swung toward the center of the campus.

"WHAT'S going on here?" Jeffries, the driver, and Mulcahey asked in the same breath.

"I don't know, but it's sure bad. Some sort of animal's got loose. You can't kill it, at least with bullets. It got one girl that I know of and maybe more by this time."

Siren shrieking, the car squeezed through a space that opened up for it on Washington Avenue, one of the intercity traffic highways, which cut through a side of the campus.

Pandemonium reigned. The invisible wildfire that mysteriously warns people of danger had swept the district. A continual stream of automobiles left the territory which had already been closed to incoming traffic. Classes halted, buildings seemed to empty themselves, hundreds of students thronged the streets and lanes leading to safety, raucous horns and cries mingled confusedly with the shriller high notes of whistles.

"Where to?" inquired Jeffries.

"Toward the river. That's where they were headin' when I last saw them." The river was the Mississippi, which marked the western boundary of the campus.

The car leaped ahead. There wasn't a better driver on the force than Jeffries, who now proved his uncanny skill by dodging, threading, and twisting his way through a one-direction jam of traffic that extended from curb to curb.

They had scarcely gone a block when they heard a staccato burst of firing. Almost immediately afterward there came from somewhere ahead three sharp blasts of a policeman's whistle—and the chilling sound of a human scream.

"That's where we'll find them," said Williams grimly. "Keep yourselves ready —you've never been up against anythin' like this before."

Traffic thinned out, Jeffries drove the car as though it were an express train down Washington Avenue. A couple of blocks ahead hung the bridge that linked two cities. At the near end of the bridge they could make out a scattering group of men, some swiftly rolling objects, and two or three sinister white heaps. There was a truck lying on its side, too, and some squealing animals that ran madly in every direction.

"Pigs!" grunted Jeffries disgustedly. "So that's your strange animal, is it? Well you——"

His jaw hung open but he didn't finish his sentence. One of the rolling objects overtook a pig, there was a blurred thrashing, and with incredible swiftness the pig somehow dissolved into the ball that covered it.

A police captain was racing toward them with hand signalling. Jeffries slammed on the brakes and the man piled in as the car decelerated to a screaming halt.

"Wait here for reinforcements!" the captain panted. "Can't do a thing with those brutes. Got three of our men already. I told 'em to get back in cars where they can do their shooting in safety

and at least have a chance to get away if necessary."

"What happened here since I sent the alarm in?"

"Are you Williams? Say, what do *you* know about these things?"

"Nothin' more than you do," and Williams told in a few brief sentences what had caused him to turn in the alarm, while all four kept their eyes warily glued on the scene half a block distant.

"God knows how we're going to stop them," said the worried captain, "but we've got to. I pulled in here less'n five minutes ago. Just after we came, a livestock truck somehow broke through the guard across the bridge. I sent one of the men down to head it off on this end, but before he was half-way there, one of those brutes rolled out of the trees by the river-bank and landed square in front of the truck. The driver must have lost his head. We saw his front wheels jerk sidewise and the truck crashed.

"He was thrown clear out and I hope instantly killed, for that big blob simply rolled over on him and ate him. The man I'd sent opened fire, and he's a crack shot, but his bullets didn't faze the brute.

"The pigs ran all over, squealing like mad. Five or six more of those blobs suddenly rolled out of the bushes and went after the pigs, hunting them down.

"There were six of us to begin with and we all opened fire, but we might as well have shot at the sky for all the good it did. The things went on eating and rolling, and I'd swear I saw one of them split in two and each half go sliding off.

"Then they started after us, and—well, there are only three of us now."

Only three of the spheres also were in sight, and they were occupied with the last of the pigs. As the captain concluded his brief account, they heard the weird wail of a siren, and a few moments later a riot squad car roared toward them. The captain hailed it.

"Got any grenades or bombs?"

"Yeah, but not many. I think there's four."

THE captain took two of the grenades and passed the others to Williams, whom he apparently put special confidence in solely because Williams first had encountered the beasts.

The three huge spherical masses had finished with the pigs. For a moment they quivered uncertainly, then, as by a concerted movement, began rolling toward the policemen; but where three spheres had been, there were now six advancing swiftly.

"Try the guns on them again," ordered the captain. "We'll keep the grenades in reserve. Concentrate on the nearest one. Ready? Fire!"

A blast of shotgun, sub-machine gun and rifle fire literally tore the first mass to pieces, but the other five came on like the wind.

"Again!"

Another burst ripped to shreds a second mass, but the rest were within yards now.

"Two down!" shouted the captain exultantly. Simultaneously he and Williams heaved the grenades.

A third monster vanished, blown to minute particles. The other intended target slewed sidewise, and the grenade exploded harmlessly.

"Run for your lives!" some one bawled. "We can't get the guns reloaded fast enough!"

Then the creatures were upon them and all semblance of order vanished. A man yelled and went down before a sphere that got him from behind. The riot car began to pick up speed and the

captain made a wild leap for its dashboard before it was too late.

In the first frenzied scramble Williams jumped crabwise. For a moment he had saved his life—at the expense of Mulcahey's. The Irishman who was standing by Williams believed that bullets would stop anything alive, and he stood his ground, emptying his revolver at the gray blob.

"You fool! Run!" screamed Williams.

And then the gluey mass was upon Mulcahey, and his limbs flailed vainly as he was sucked into it. A kind of horror seized Williams as he saw the body of his friend being hideously consumed. Hardly aware of what he did, he flipped the grenade. Man and beast vanished in the explosion that gave at any rate a clean death.

He heard another explosion follow close upon his and looked up. The captain had flung the last grenade at the monster that was devouring the first man to be overcome. But he flung it a second too late, and the monster finished and moved off just as he threw it.

Williams saw it coming and turned with a shout, "Come on, Jeff——"

But the radio car remained where it was, and Jeffries made no answer, since skeletons are for ever silent, and the sixth creature, glutted with the victim whom it had evidently trapped while he watched the main battle, dropped heavily out of the car, and likewise began hastening toward Williams.

If Williams ever felt the unnerving grip of fear, he felt it then, with the remaining two gray beasts driving toward him from opposite directions like balls of smoke. He knew that his gun was useless, that he could never outrace the devouring things.

There was only one remote possibility of escape. He sped toward the sphere between himself and the car and dived clear over it, sprawling to the ground. He was on his feet in a flash and bounded onward toward the car, but the gray beast had abruptly reversed its motion and was closing the gap with terrifying rapidity.

Williams won by a leap. He thanked God that the motor was running as he jumped in and crashed the door shut. The skeleton that was still huddled in the driver's seat crackled grotesquely as he shoved it aside. The pursuing animal plopped against the side of the car as Williams threw it into gear and almost wrecked the mechanism in trying to force it into instant high speed.

Just before he reached the bridge, he saw another cluster of the strange beasts emerge from the trees and begin rolling across the bridge toward the city beyond.

"Oh my God!" Williams muttered with a kind of despairing reverence. "There'll be no stoppin' them once they're on both sides of the river!" But there was nothing that he alone could do to prevent them from reaching the opposite side.

As if by magic, another sphere materialized in the street. Williams didn't try to avoid it. Rather, with a savage delight he roared down upon the monster. The car thudded into it and skidded completely around as though on ice, and a shower of slimy stuff spattered the windshield, a substance greasy and malodorous.

"O. K. Back to the hospital and that Anscot fellow it is, then," he said softly, and sped up Washington Avenue.

An unnatural silence now lay over the campus. Not a human being nor a car was in sight, and all the busy sounds of activity that characterize the usual day in any city were strangely absent. Perhaps a few timid souls were still hidden in the

apparently deserted university buildings, but if they were, they gave no sign of their presence.

"CAN Anscot see any one yet?" Williams inquired breathlessly after he had hurried into the reception room of the hospital. "It's a matter of life and death."

"Well, if it's that important, yes, but only for a few minutes. He has just been returned from the operating-room and can not be subjected to any strain. Room 27, left wing, ground floor."

Williams was already hurrying down the corridor before she had finished her statement. He paused for a perfunctory knock at Room 27 and was opening the door when he heard a faint "Come in."

Anscot, swathed in bandages, pale and emaciated of face, and with a feverish light brightening his eyes, barely turned to look as Williams entered.

"What is it you want?" The voice came, weak and tired.

Williams stated his purpose as briefly and quickly as possible. "And so you see," he concluded, "why it's necessary to find out all we can about the beasts. I am sorry to have to intrude upon you, but you can understand the danger. What are the things? Do you know anything about them? How did they get loose and where did they come from?"

A slight sigh issued from the wasted figure on the cot. A vague, far-away look appeared in his eyes and he seemed to be thinking of other things, or marshaling elusive thoughts.

"My worst fear has been proved true, then," Professor Anscot at length said slowly. "And the blame rests entirely on me, even though an accident was responsible. The 'beasts', as you call them, are not animals. They are protoplasm."

"They're—*what?*"

"Protoplasm, the primary stuff from which life developed. Or from another viewpoint, they are giant, one-celled amebas."

"Amebas?" echoed Williams foolishly, the conversation thus far having failed to convey much meaning to him.

"Yes, amebas. Artificial ones, or, if you prefer, manufactured ones."

"Manufactured?"

"Yes," answered the professor a bit irritably. "Or at least the first one was.

"I have realized the biologist's dream of creating life in a laboratory from man-made materials and with every step controlled. A sound knowledge of chemistry, physics, and biology, plus a little experimenting, were all that was necessary. You will find my notes and an account of my work among my papers in the laboratory. I would advise you to destroy them, as I most certainly shall do myself if I recover from these injuries.

"For many years, biologists have been on the verge of creating life. Undoubtedly some one else will rediscover my method even though I obliterate my results, but I am ready to close my inquiry, now that I have witnessed its disastrous results.

"All organic life, as you probably know, is based on the substance called protoplasm. The simplest form of such life is the one-celled ameba commonly found in stagnant water.

"I analyzed the ameba until I knew exactly what its chemical equivalents and constituents were. That was my first step. But one can not merely mix a group of carefully weighed chemicals and expect an ameba to develop. Even that organism, low as it is in the evolutionary scale, is a system, infinitely less complex than the human body, to be sure, yet in its simple, unicellular nature offering almost insuperable difficulties to every one who has

tried to create it out of basic chemicals. The materials must be wrought into a pattern, a system, an organization.

"And when I had succeeded in this second step, still a third, and the most difficult of all, remained. I had fashioned something that was to all intents an ameba, except that it did not live. It was as dead matter as any corpse. The spark of life was lacking, the vital force that would activate the inanimate substance.

"It wasn't until Millikan discovered the cosmic rays that I was on anything like the right track. I then pursued my investigation along the lines suggested by his work, and was finally able to control cosmic rays. You will find that apparatus likewise in my laboratory.

"A week ago, under the stimulus of the cosmic rays, my artificial ameba came to life, stirred itself, absorbed food, and in general behaved like one of nature's amebas. That moment was the peak of my life, beyond which nothing can ever again rouse my enthusiasm. It was a discovery of greater significance to mankind than Columbus's showing the way to the Western Hemisphere was."

The glow of pride in successful accomplishment of a brilliant feat shone for an instant in the aged scientist's eyes, until it was replaced by a haunted look, and he resumed his account.

"An ameba, besides being a simple organism, is minute in size. Having solved the major difficulties, I now wanted to continue the experiment on a larger scale, so that I could watch every step with an eye unaided by microscopes or lenses. Furthermore, since my remaining years were likely to be few, I wanted to learn as much as possible in the shortest time possible.

"To that end, I deliberately changed the chemical constituents of my next ameba for two purposes. First, I wished to create one of large dimensions, which would not be dependent on water for its habitat. Second, I wished to speed up its natural functions so that I could study within a period of hours what would otherwise require days.

"Unfortunately, I succeeded. I created a giant new kind of ameba this morning."

A shudder of pain racked Professor Anscot and he bit his lips as the pain-deadening novocaine began to wear off.

"You created *one?*" interrupted Williams. "Then how does it happen that there are so many of them?"

The scientist smiled bitterly. "The answer is—fission. An ameba reproduces by the simple process of dividing itself into two individuals, a process technically known as fission. You yourself witnessed my ameba split into two parts after it had digested food. In some ways, it is like an animated stomach. The ameba is a viscous thing which absorbs and digests food directly. It moves by contractile projection of parts of its surface."

For a moment a frown of intense concentration wrinkled his forehead. "According to what you have told me, the first fission occurred about twenty minutes after I brought the ameba to life. We may assume then that so long as food is plentiful, fission will occur in each individual every twenty minutes. If all the individuals survived—and it is sadly evident that most of them have—there were eight at the end of the first hour; there are sixty-four now, less those you killed; in an hour there will be five hundred and twelve. Within twelve hours, there will be millions of them!"

"Why did you let the first one out? Great God, how can they be stopped?" burst out Williams.

"I didn't let it escape," came the answer from pain-twisted lips. "It was an accident. About ten minutes of the

cosmic ray were needed to animate the first ameba. I forgot, when I created one which would live at an abnormal pace, that the spark would also start it going more rapidly.

"My back was turned when it came to life. I received my first warning with a terrible pain in my legs as the thing began to—ugh!—digest me alive."

Anscot's countenance was white with suffering now, and his eyes burning with fever, as he tried in an almost inaudible whisper to finish his account.

"I suppose it was my scream you heard. I drove the brute off—would have killed it if it hadn't mutilated my legs. I——"

"You what?" Williams asked desperately, anxiously. "What did you do? Tell me, how were you goin' to kill it? How did you drive it off?"

But there was no answer to his frantic questions. Consciousness had slipped away from the wounded man, and a nurse hastened in with a morphine hypodermic to alleviate the searing pain that had been growing around the stumps of his legs.

"Sorry, but you'll have to go now," she told Williams. "The hypo will wear off in a couple of hours. You may return for a few minutes then, if you wish. There is no chance of his regaining consciousness earlier."

"A COUPLE of hours!" muttered Williams in dismay as he retraced his steps down the corridor. Where there were only some sixty of the things now, there would be several thousand of them within two hours. Despite the warm day, a cold moisture dampened his face.

At the receiving-room desk he paused to telephone headquarters for orders. They were simple. Every available man was ordered to surround the district where the creatures had broken loose, except for Williams, who was to remain on guard at the hospital generally, and over Anscot specifically, until the precious information was divulged.

The next two hours were a nightmare for Williams. The radios in all rooms had been disconnected in order that patients would not be alarmed, but for the benefit of the staff, the key set in the reception room was kept on.

Minute by minute the scenes in a tragic drama were audibly unfolded. The destroying horde was multiplying even more rapidly than Anscot had predicted. Hundreds and hundreds, possibly thousands already, of the giant amebas were devastating an area of almost a square mile in the heart of the twin cities.

Low as the organisms were in the scale of life, their ferocity was unparalleled, their tenacity appalling. It seemed impossible to destroy them, except with high explosives whose use was restricted partly by the nature of the region infested, and partly by an actual shortage of dynamite.

The radio, newspapers, and whistles had broadcast a general alarm. All available men were asked to unite in attacking the danger, weapons of every sort came out of store-rooms and hiding-places. Two great streams worked at cross-purposes. Converging lines brought hundreds of volunteer fighters to resist the horde. Diverging lines carried the thousands who by all sorts of conveyances were evacuating the city.

Along a circular battle-front of about three miles comprising both sides of the river the battle was raging. And the line of struggle was steadily widening. Staccato of guns and the bursting of explosives were answered by cries of mortal agony when some fresh victim was caught and consumed.

There was no way of estimating how large the death list had grown. Undoubt-

edly dozens and perhaps hundreds of human beings had perished, with the total swiftly mounting. Any living organism, human or animal, seemed acceptable to the voracious amebas. And their astounding ability to multiply made the menace of their well-nigh indestructible nature doubly powerful.

Outside aid had already been requested. State troops were on their way now. Of man-power there was no shortage—as yet—but the nearest large supply of munitions was five hundred miles away. The local stores were on the point of exhaustion. Long before transport airplanes and fast express trains could arrive with additional explosives, the peril would be beyond control. Once the amebas were numbered in millions, or even thousands, mathematical reduplication and multiplication would result in their splitting and spreading faster than they could be destroyed.

Citizens could indeed barricade themselves in homes and buildings, sealed against entry by the organisms. But what good could be accomplished? Starvation would eventually force the occupants out, to be pursued by the prowling and ravenous monsters.

And when the amebas had multiplied beyond check in the twin cities, could there be any checking of them? They were likely to roll out in every direction, a circular tidal wave, engulfing whatever living creature lay in their path, protoplasmic, irresistible death racing across the country, devastating cities and devouring men with a cumulative rapidity.

Tense and restless from the excitement, Williams gripped his chair till his knuckles showed white, or paced back and forth. This inactivity was as great a strain as battling the amebas had been; but he had his orders and he was too loyal to disobey them.

There were moments when he cursed the biologist who lay dying as the result of his own work; yet it was not Anscot's fault that the first ameba escaped. If anything, he must be blamed for having been too thorough, having labored too well. The materials out of which he fashioned the giant unicell had also given it gastric activity of hitherto unknown power, efficiency, and nearly instantaneous absorption of food.

The radio continued to tell a story of disaster. All along the line, men were perishing and the line being forced back. From time to time, an ameba was slaughtered, and more slowly now their numbers increased; but the slight check was futile, for they still spread with a speed far greater than any possibility of restraint.

WILLIAMS was fidgety from inaction when a subconscious intuition that something else was wrong came to him. He had seen nothing to alarm him, his ears had not been startled by unfamiliar sounds. He sniffed the air inquisitively without being able to detect the trace of a foreign odor.

Whence came this intangible warning, this sense of imminent danger? He could not say, and although he looked around him and saw nothing unusual, the impression persisted.

"Say!" he suddenly addressed the girl at the reception desk. "Are you sure that all the windows and doors in this place were closed? Could anything get in?"

"Certainly not, at least without ringing a bell or smashing its way in," she replied crisply. "Everything was locked tight when we received the first warning."

Williams looked at her. She seemed about to make some further remark when her eyes gazed past him and opened wide,

Her face went dead-white and she slumped to the floor in a faint.

Williams whirled around. From the corridor to the right wing a giant ameba was issuing.

All his faculties froze in that first instant of panicky horror and bewildered shock. The terrible possibilities that might come true with the thing loose in the hospital overwhelmed him. He knew not whether to flee or attack. Irrelevantly he wondered how the creature had gained entrance. Not till later did any one discover in Room 18 the skeleton which was all that remained of the delirious patient who had crawled from his bed and opened the window for fresh air.

The moment passed and Williams went into a whirlwind of action as the ameba emerged. He swept up the chair beside him and hurled it crashing at the viscid mass. The organism rolled sidewise but not quite quickly enough. The chair thudded against it, and for a second its progress was halted.

With the same motion, Williams had turned around and leaped for the corridor to the left wing. The monster disentangled itself from the chair and rolled after him.

There were few places within immediate access that promised safety, and of those few, almost without thinking, he chose Anscot's room. He raced down the corridor like a shot, knowing that at every step the ameba shortened the gap. He did not even try to look back and see how close the hungry organism was. He fled with the wings of fear and the desperate hope of safety. He reached the door of Room 27 with the furious patter of his running feet grimly echoed by a sinister and ugly gurgling rustle.

He burst into Room 27 and forced the door shut with the more than human strength lent by terror, closed it as a heavy weight thudded against it from the other side.

Trembling, shaken by the narrowness of his escape, he braced himself against the door for a long minute while he gulped in great lungfuls of air. He could hear the ominous sounds made by the monster on the other side as it prowled around and tried to find a way in. They ceased shortly, but without giving Williams any relief, for he did not know whether the thing had gone off in search of other prey or whether it had stationed itself for an indefinite wait.

He too might have prolonged his watch if his attention had not been diverted by an unintelligible muttering from the supine figure of Anscot, who tossed restlessly in the fever of delirium.

"Water?" asked Williams, and strode to a table where a pitcher stood. He forgot even the danger outside in the appeal of suffering to his humanity, and poured out a glass of water, which he raised to the patient's lips.

"Fire, fire," moaned Anscot faintly.

Williams felt his forehead. It was hot and dry. "Gosh, he sure is burnin' up all right," the policeman thought. "Here, drink this," he said aloud.

The dying man swallowed the fluid thirstily. Though his eyes were wild with the light of fever and his face wasted to emaciation, instinct helped him to what his wandering mind could not see. His body shook convulsively again, so that the remainder of the water spilled, but he continued to murmur, "Fire, fire."

"Out of his head . . . crazy," Williams thought. "What the heck does he want fire for?"

Anscot twisted aimlessly and the seconds flew by. It was obvious that he had not much longer to live. Suddenly an incoherent jumble of phrases poured out,

faint and rapid, so that Williams had to bend low over him in order to hear.

"Fire, fire—burn it up—X-ray, take that, you spawn of hell—oh God, my legs!—now it's gone, I should have closed the window, but they'll catch it and burn it — help! help! — I'm done for —fatty tissue—if only I'd kept the blow-torch burning——"

THE unguided voice went on, ever growing feebler, but Williams heard no more. He stood as one transfixed. The apparently meaningless words seared into his brain like flame, in a flash he saw it all—Anscot working in his laboratory with his back turned to the as yet lifeless protoplasm, the awakening of the mass and its silent attack on the scientist, his frantic manipulation of an X-ray machine that somehow drove the giant ameba away.

And all this precious information wasted, hopelessly wasted! If Williams tried to escape by the door, the ameba would devour him. He peered out the window, only to see more of the organisms coursing swiftly across the hospital grounds. There was no telephone in the room. If he pushed the night-bell, he would only summon a nurse to gruesome living death from the monster, if the bell was heeded at all.

He was ready to risk his own life in a futile dash when the simplest possible idea occurred to him together with the deepest disgust he had ever had for his occasional obtuseness. Swiftly he reached out and tore a sheet from the bed.

"Sorry, old man," he whispered gently, "it's our only chance."

With the sheet over one arm, he hurried to the door and listened intently. He could hear nothing. As noiselessly as possible, he whipped a pocket-lighter from his trousers, flicked it, and touched it to the corners of the sheet. Spreading lines of flame began to race inward.

He jerked the door wide open and peered out. The huge ameba had been half-way down the corridor, on the point of pushing back a loosely closed door to one of the wards. At the sound that Williams made, it turned and instantly began rolling toward him with its strange, swift motion.

There was a whiteness on his face but there was no shrinking away or trembling of his hands as he waited, even though the running lines of flame scorched him and licked around his fingers. He waited till the protoplasmic mass was less than ten feet distant; then, in a continuous, dual movement he flung the burning sheet over the creature and leaped backward toward safety.

Instinctively the giant tried to dodge; in vain, for the sheet billowed out and dropped squarely upon it. Williams saw a mad flurry and writhing for an instant, heard a weird, voiceless sibilance, and all at once the smoldering blaze flamed hotly brighter, with a greasy sputter.

SOME people think that the narrative ends with the story of Williams' frenzied dash to a telephone, and of how headquarters sent out an excited message, and of how gasoline, wood, blow-torches, X-rays, gas, and acetylene torches were commandeered everywhere to fight the destroying horde, and of how for two entire days the relentless battle raged along a roughly circular front of approximately five miles before the amebas were checked and the last of their thousands destroyed.

But the real end of the story lies in a grave at Oakwood Cemetery whose headstone bears a simple inscription to the memory of George Anscot, "who half solved the mystery of life. May he succeed as well in the mystery of death."

Dominion

By CLARK ASHTON SMITH

Empress of all my life, it is not known to thee
What hidden world thou holdest evermore in fee;
  What muffled levies rise, from mist and Lethe drawn,

Waging some goblin war at thy forgotten whim;
What travelers in lone Cimmeria, drear and dim,
  Follow the rumor of thy face toward the dawn.

Plain are those nearer lands whereon thou lookest forth:
Thy fields upon the south, thy cities in the north;
  But vaster is that sealed and subterraneous realm:

High towers are built for thee with hushed demonian toil
In dayless lands, and furrows drawn through a dark soil,
  And sable oceans crossed by many an unstarred helm.

Though unto thee is sent a tribute of wrought gold
By them that delve therein, never shalt thou behold
  How the ore is digged from mines too near to Erebus;

Though strange Sabean myrrh within thy censers fume,
Thou shalt not ever guess the Afrit-haunted gloom
  Whence the rich balm was won with labor perilous.

Occulted still from thee, thy power is on lost things,
On alien seraphim that seek with desperate wings,
  Flown from their dying orb, the confines of thy heaven;

Yea, still thy whisper moves, and magically stirs
To life the shapeless dust in shattered sepulchers;
  And in dark bread and wine thou art the untold leaven.

But never shalt thou dream how in some far abysm
Thy lightly spoken word has been an exorcism
  Driving foul spirits from a wanderer bewrayed;

With eyes fulfilled of noon, haply thou shalt not see
How, in a land illumed by suns of ebony,
  Beneath thy breath the fiery shadows flame and fade.

"Zarchon stared down at the white-haired doctor."

The Spider's Web

By JOHN SCOTT DOUGLAS

An eery weird detective story of grim happenings and stark, panic terror

ONCE more the maze of roads brought Jeff Lawton back to the entrance of the forbidding-looking estate. The big, rough-hewn detective braked his coupé with a snort of disgust. Through the single opening in the stone wall, he glimpsed a weather-beaten mansion set in a wilderness of unkempt shrubbery and winter-denuded trees.

"Deserted, probably," Lawton growled.

Suddenly, however, he saw his mistake. A thin, blue exclamation point of smoke rose against the bank of black thunderheads. An occupied mansion out here in this wild, desolate section of the Catskills! Strange at this bleak period of the year!

Spirits lifted, Lawton drove through

the entrance and along the grass-grown drive, finally coming to a halt under a porte-cochère. Blinds drawn over dirty windows, peeling paint and decayed-looking steps gave the place an air of desolation and desertion. Stout iron bars at the windows added a prison aspect.

The big detective stepped out of his car and mounted the creaking steps. He pulled a rusted bell-knob, and heard a jangle somewhere within. Minutes crawled as he waited, and an inner foreboding warned him to be on his way. With a strong man's contempt for fear, he ignored the uneasy feeling.

An insurance company had sent him into the region to try to discover the reasons behind the disappearance of cars which, driving through this district, had vanished completely. Not only cars, but drivers! Lawton had learned nothing. The maze of roads had taken him past one deserted summer place after another; always, however, he had come back to this entrance, unable to find his way out. The approach of a storm was evident in the thickening air, and Lawton was anxious to reach the main highway before darkness fell and the storm struck.

Abruptly a heavy step sounded, and the door was opened to a crack. Lawton stiffened with surprize. In the crack was a glimpse of a crimson uniform, worn by a gigantic negro. The Nubian's countenance was sullen, and a grayish scar was drawn from one ear to below the ugly, twisted mouth. Interest flickered in the sullen black eyes. The negro opened the door wide and motioned Lawton to enter.

The detective shook his red head. "I'm trying to find my way to Ruyskyll," he started to explain, only to have his voice die on a choked note as the negro opened his mouth and pointed at the red interior.

His tongue had been cut out!

The negro indicated by gestures that Lawton should enter the living-room to the right, and that he would bring someone who could talk. Astonished at his discovery, Lawton obeyed without question.

The room was large and cold and smelled musty. But a small fire burned in a grate, and Lawton crossed the room to stand before it. He had not reached the fireside, however, when he heard a *click* and wheeled. The door by which he had entered was closed!

His pulses pounding, Lawton strode swiftly across the room, trying the door. Locked! He pounded on the oak panels. No response!

Lawton reflected on his reason for coming to this region. Cars passing through here in winter had disappeared with their drivers. *And all roads, unless you knew your way out, led to this deserted mansion!* Alarm suddenly chilled the big detective's heart. He removed his automatic, released the safety-catch, and slipped it into his coat pocket. Then he made a reconnaissance of the room. Four windows, all barred in such a manner as to give a crowbar difficulties. Only one door.

And the lock clicked again in this door at that moment. Lawton's hand slipped into his pocket, closing on the automatic. But it was not the gigantic negro who entered.

The man oozing through the door weighed, Lawton guessed, at least four hundred pounds. Even so, his clothes were too large, the sleeves of his coat extending to his knuckles. His fat face was dark and oily-looking, and his black, unkempt hair framed the large face and straggled over eyes set under heavy brows. But the brow above the eyes was surprizingly high. And the eyes held a strange gleam of cunning or shrewdness

—the eyes of a fanatic, or a genius. Lawton's mind flashed to the grand piano in this room. A musician, perhaps?

"I must apologize for the actions of my servant," the repulsively obese creature said, his thick lips quirking. "Cloud mistrusts everyone, and I can not break him of the habit of locking people in this room while he goes to call me."

Lawton nodded. "Sorry to bother you, but I'm lost. Perhaps you could tell me how to get on to Ruyskyll."

"Certainly; certainly. But if you're a stranger, you'd never find your way out. I suspected the reason for your call, and asked Cloud to get my car from the garage. In a moment he'll be able to lead you to the main highway."

Lawton's apprehensions dwindled. "Kind of you, sir."

"Not at all, not at all." The sensuous lips were smiling again as the elephantine man crossed the floor, extending his hand. "Doctor Zarchon is my name. Perhaps you're familiar with my works on biologic chemistry?"

Disarmed by the exhibition of friendship, Lawton extended his hand. But the large, damp hand made a quick gesture, closing on the detective's wrist, instead. Cold steel circled Lawton's wrist, and he heard the *click* of a handcuff as he tried, too late, to draw his hand back. Impossible! The other end of the 'cuff circled the fat wrist of Doctor Zarchon!

The reason for the over-long sleeves became instantly apparent. They covered the handcuffed wrist and part of the hand in the palm of which the doctor carried his handcuff.

Lawton, however, had been in tight places too many times before to lose more than an instant in surprize. His left hand shot toward the pocket holding the automatic. If he could reach it, he still held the aces!

Zarchon anticipated the movement. A damp, surprizingly strong hand closed on Lawton's left wrist. A wrench, and the red-headed detective was thrown off balance. At the same moment, the fat doctor threw himself forward. His enormous weight was too much at an instant when Lawton was trying to keep his footing.

Lawton went down, the huge man on top of him. His head struck a bare space between small rugs. Lightning streaked before his pain-filled eyes, to be followed by a short interval of blackness.

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GAINING consciousness, Jeff Lawton found himself lying on his handcuffed hands. Doctor Zarchon was speaking in French to Cloud. The giant negro now wore only the crimson pantaloons of his uniform; his gargantuan chest was bare to the waist.

"What's the meaning of this?" Lawton snapped.

Zarchon continued giving his orders in the tongue unfamiliar to the detective. The gleam was in Cloud's black eyes again, a gleam almost fanatical. The sullen countenance explained itself now. Cloud must be a Haitian, perhaps a follower of some voodoo cult.

Zarchon leaned over Lawton, and his half-circling hands gave the detective the impression of some large, fat spider. "You are to help us," he said, "by giving a blood transfusion. You do not mind?"

Lawton's blue eyes hardened. "Certainly I mind!"

"No matter," said Zarchon lightly, and went out.

Presently he returned with some instruments. While Cloud leaned a heavy knee on Lawton's stomach to hold him down, the doctor methodically rolled up the detective's sleeve, and, despite Jeff's effort to struggle, took a sample of his blood.

"Cloud will place you in a chair," said the doctor quite amiably. "I'll go to my laboratory and see whether your blood is suitable for the transfusion."

"I refuse to submit to a transfusion," Lawton flared.

Thinking of the vanished cars which had come to this region, he added fiercely: "It's known where I am, and if anything happens to me, you'll hear of it."

"Doubtless," said Zarchon soothingly. With a shrug of his sloping, fleshy shoulders he left the room.

The giant Nubian lifted Lawton as though he were a child, and deposited him in a chair. The detective was on his feet in a flash. Cloud's fist smashed against his chest, knocking him back into the chair. Twice more Lawton tried to rise, only to be struck by that big fist.

Realizing the futility of his efforts, he relaxed, watching the scowling negro, trying to plan. With his hands manacled, he was powerless against the negro with anything less than a gun. His own, he could tell by the lightness of his pocket, was gone. Perhaps bribery might work! Lawton attempted it, but the big guard showed no understanding. Then he attempted to question Cloud. The big face did not change expression.

Lawton next turned his mind to Zarchon. Why did he want the blood? Was it really for a transfusion or for some ghastly experiment upon which Zarchon had fixed his disordered brain? Was this the place where the other cars had vanished? Had other drivers, caught in this maze, stopped here to ask directions and been caught as he was caught?

It was a long time before Zarchon returned. His eyes glittered strangely, and he rubbed his damp hands together. He removed another pair of handcuffs from his pocket, and while Cloud held the detective's legs, snapped them on the prisoner's ankles.

"Zarchon," Lawton snapped, "you can't get away with this."

"Out here in these mountains?" Zarchon laughed sardonically. "Who could know? Besides, you are to be my guest. For a while, my friend, for a while!"

Speechless with fury, Lawton could do nothing when the big negro raised him to his shoulder like a sack of grain, and walked toward the door. Cloud climbed the stairs two steps at a time. Zarchon puffed along more slowly behind, pulling himself up each step by the banister.

At the top, the Nubian passed down a hall, waited at a door at the end for Zarchon. The doctor unlocked the door, and Cloud walked into a long, narrow, bare room.

FROM his elevated position, Lawton could see a number of peculiarly constructed hammocks. Four were limp and empty, but the fifth, in the darkened corner of the room, entirely circled an emaciated figure. Lawton saw the man's white hair and wide, staring eyes, and a shudder passed over him.

What chamber of horrors was this? That hammock was like the skeins which a spider draped around the body of a fly to trap it. Were these hammocks spiderwebs for humans? And what was the inhuman purpose for which these human flies were being kept in this bare room?

Lawton had seen enough to fear the worst. He kicked convulsively, breaking Cloud's grip. He struck the ground hard on his side. Pain couldn't dull his senses, however, in that moment of desperation. He got his feet under him somehow, and was half raised to his feet when Cloud struck at him. Ducking, Lawton dived head first at the big negro's belly.

His head seemed to be wrenched from

his shoulders. But Cloud bellowed with pain—a deep, formless sound which came from his throat. Before Cloud could recover, Lawton butted again. The negro reeled backward, somehow keeping his feet.

A flash at one side! Lawton's eyes shifted. Zarchon was smashing down with an automatic butt. The red-headed detective tried to jerk his head away. Failed! Stars burst before his eyes, and his knees buckled.

As he struck the floor, Cloud was upon him again, his eyes blazing. He jerked the detective erect, and struck him with the flat of his ham-like palm. Lawton thought his jaw must be broken.

"Cloud!" Zarchon thundered, raising his automatic.

The negro dropped Lawton, cowering from the weapon. Zarchon pointed it at the big, black chest, and roared in French. Cloud promptly picked Lawton up, carrying him to the hammock at the opposite side of the room from the white-haired man. At least it was by the single window.

Dropping Lawton into the wide hammock, Cloud brought the two sides together until they overlapped, and then tied the two ropes fastened to either side together, knotting them on the under side.

Zarchon then motioned the negro away. His thick lips curved in the smile of a hungry beast; his dark eyes glittered. He spun the hammock swiftly half a dozen times, as a spider spins a fly which has blundered into its trap. Thus closing the two ends to make escape impossible, Zarchon tied each with a rope. The bottom of each rope had a hook which fitted in a ring below each end, making any but the slightest movement of the hammock a thing too difficult to achieve.

"Now," said Zarchon in his hoarse voice, "we will see to the transfusion, since you fall in with my plans."

Lawton glared. His blood seethed.

While Cloud waited with big arms crossed on his chest, Zarchon departed into an adjoining room, returning with a table, glass tubes, bottles, and the other appurtenances of a transfusion.

Lawton was grimly determined to make the thing impossible; but he soon saw that his own wishes did not enter into the question. The hammock gave him no chance to brace himself for resistance. And when Zarchon, pushing his sleeve up by reaching through the strands of the hammock, had bared his arm, Cloud held it in a grip of steel.

Zarchon then bared his own hairy arm, and Lawton saw that it was pitted with scars. Nausea sickened the detective. What was this fiendish, elephantine man—a vampire? Instead of sucking the blood of his victims, he apparently resorted to frequent transfusions, taking the blood of any hapless victim who stumbled into his web, when that blood matched his own.

Lawton's brain checked with disbelief. Vampires! Spiders! Spider's webs! Were these the reflections of a sane man? It flashed through his mind that he must be losing his reason. Such things in 1935? He must be going mad!

No, it was Doctor Zarchon who was mad! Blood-mad! The explanation of the man's elephantine proportions became clear. Into his body had gone the blood of countless victims. As a spider sucks the blood of a fly, so had Doctor Zarchon, by more modern methods, sucked the blood of his human flies.

Sickening revulsion filled Lawton's heart, and he struggled afresh. But he could not prevent the transfusion. It went forward with a hideous precision which bespoke a practise in taking the blood of

men—and perhaps women—who, like flies, resorted to ineffectual resistance.

And in the end, despite Lawton's efforts, the blood began to flow through the tube—a red stream of life to feed the inhuman passion for blood which motivated this mad doctor. Lawton watched the process, his eyes smarting with fury. That his blood should go to prolong the life of such a monster!

THE transfusion completed at last, Doctor Zarchon staunched the flow of blood from Lawton's wound, and wiped his arm with alcohol—a gesture of solicitude which might have been devoted to better motives. But the big detective knew the gesture was not concern for him. To Doctor Zarchon, he was merely a fly whose life he would prolong as long as possible so that he might supply that monstrous need for blood.

The operation over, Doctor Zarchon motioned Cloud to remove the equipment. His eyes burned feverishly now, as if he had new life.

"I did not take much," he said. "You are a strong man. You should last many weeks. You will be treated well, fed well, for I must keep you in good health."

Weak from loss of blood, Lawton turned away his face. Through the barred window he could see a spot of what must have been garden. It alone was not covered with the rank growth which had overgrown the place. And in that cleared spot were a score or more of little mounds. Graves?

Lawton's heart leapt, then sank. Yes, graves! The graves of Doctor Zarchon's victims! In a few short weeks, he too would occupy one, unless——

It came to Jeff Lawton with a dismaying feeling of emptiness inside that he had solved the mystery of the disappearing cars and disappearing drivers. His agency had sent him out to solve this problem which had baffled the insurance company. He had solved it, but they would never know that he had.

With a harsh chuckle, Zarchon waddled out of the room. When his steps had died away in the hall, the white-haired man said in a thin voice, "You, too!"

Lawton turned his head. "Surely there's some way we can escape from this maniac?"

The white-haired man forced a pale smile and shook his head. He informed Lawton that he was Doctor Ernest Sawyer.

"Doctor Sawyer," Lawton whispered, "we'll have to plan an escape before this madman kills us."

"There is no escape, my friend. Is there a single object in this bare room that could be used either for escape or as a weapon?"

Lawton had to admit there was not. "But you don't mean to say you have been trussed up that way for weeks, doctor?"

"No, Lawton. Each morning I am released for an hour to pace this room. Cloud stands at the locked door with a club. And I am too weak from Zarchon's damnable transfusions to prove any match for that giant negro when he's armed and I am not."

"But with both of us, if we attack at once."

"We will not be released at the same time," the doctor said heavily. "There was a man here before me, but he died many days ago. There will be others after us to feed this vampire. But no two will ever be released for exercise at the same time."

Lawton shuddered. "You don't mean to tell me, doctor, that this man lives on human blood? Surely you don't believe in vampires——"

"I have to believe in Doctor Zarchon's

type of vampire, or question my own sanity. After all, is not seeing believing?"

"But can a human exist on blood alone?" Lawton asked incredulously.

"Not on blood alone, no. Doubtless he eats prodigiously. As a member of his profession, he confided in me when I first lost my way and came here for information. He declared that he had some serious unbalance bordering on a chronic anemia. His body could not produce sufficient red corpuscles. To supply the want and prevent anemia, he resorted to blood transfusions. The unbalance, he claims, became more pronounced, until his very life depended on a larger and larger quantity of blood."

Lawton felt his flesh crawling. "Such a monster should be destroyed! Surely there's no truth in what he says."

"I'm afraid," said Doctor Sawyer, "that there is an element of truth in his assertions. But I believe he exaggerates his condition. I think his craving has become an obsession which has upset his reason. Blood has become a drug to him.

"A great mind dethroned can produce the greatest monsters. And Doctor Zarchon's work in biologic chemistry was world-famous before he vanished. His perverted appetite for blood suggests a great mind which had gotten out of control."

Lawton's jaw muscles showed white and strained. "He should be destroyed!"

"True. But who can do so? We are merely flies in his web! I have planned escape since the instant I entered this fiendish chamber. And now I shall die without effecting it. Another transfusion, I think, will finish me."

Lawton, however, was no fatalist. He began to plan his escape, and it soon became evident to him that he could do nothing until he could escape from the hammock. But how? His pockets had been stripped. And the hammock was of stout weave.

Nevertheless, it must be accomplished somehow. Lawton began to pluck at the fibers. Steadily, persistently, he filed at one strand with his finger-nail. After what seemed ages to his cramped, aching fingers, he broke the strand.

WITHOUT stopping to rest, he started to work on an adjacent strand. Minutes later, it broke. He saw that it would take days, perhaps weeks. At the end of that time, his finger-nails might be so worn down and broken that they would no longer serve him to complete the task. The broken strands might be discovered, and he would be removed to another hammock. And, if he eventually freed himself from the human spider-web, he was still prisoner in this chamber of horrors—without means of defense or escape. He was still handcuffed.

Hopeless situation! But Jeff Lawton believed in meeting one problem at a time. Better at least a fight for his life than Doctor Sawyer's fatalistic resignation to death.

Darkness fell, and the brooding storm struck at the same moment. Lightning flashes slashed open the black sky, throwing the room into bluish-white relief. The shadow accompaniment of the thunder drums followed, rumbling, clapping sharply, rattling the frame house. And, as the storm continued and the night wore on, Lawton was grateful for the angry elements. Lightning and thunder kept him from falling asleep, and he was able to work hour after hour, long after his aching hands and arms clamored for rest. But finally he could work no longer.

He was awakened by the entrance of Cloud. The negro carried a breakfast tray, released Doctor Sawyer, and permitted him to eat. Then Doctor Sawyer

tried to walk a little, but he was too weak to stand for many minutes at a time. When his hour of freedom was up, Cloud replaced the handcuffs, and trussed the dying doctor up in the hammock.

Allowed the same freedom, Lawton washed in a little bathroom a few doors down the hall, observing that there was nothing within that might be used as a weapon, ate heartily, and then flexed his muscles and paced the floor to renew his strength. But his heart was in his throat during this promenade for fear Cloud would observe the broken strands, and he confined his pacing to the darker portion of the room to keep the negro's eyes away from his hammock. Lawton went peacefully back to his web, knowing that he had no chance against Cloud's club, and any resistance on his part would lead to the discovery of the broken strands.

So it went for two more days, during all of which time Lawton continued working feverishly, praying his work would not be discovered during his morning exercise. And during all that time, Doctor Sawyer grew weaker and weaker, until his conversations were limited to monosyllables.

THE morning of the fourth day, Doctor Zarchon paid them a visit. He gave Lawton a satisfied glance, and the red-headed detective's heart pounded heavily for fear the monster would turn him in some way and discover the broken strands. Presently he walked over to Doctor Sawyer, and after a cursory examination said:

"You can serve me but once more, doctor."

Lawton's blood boiled. "I'll give you your hellish transfusion," he snarled. One more transfusion, he knew, would kill the old man.

Zarchon's thick lips curled in a sensuous grin. "You will keep. You will have that honor another time. Doctor Sawyer is going fast now."

Despite Lawton's furious words, Doctor Zarchon prepared his equipment for another transfusion from the diminished blood supply of the old man. Lawton writhed in helpless fury. He cursed Zarchon; but the monster did not appear to hear.

The transfusion accomplished, Doctor Zarchon stared down at the white-haired doctor from beneath his tangle of black hair. The room was deathly still, except for the moaning of Doctor Sawyer. And presently that moaning changed to a death-rattle. He was dying.

Zarchon rattled out an order in French, and Cloud hastened to obey. A few minutes later, Lawton saw him working in the cleared place below the window with pick and shovel. Digging Doctor Sawyer's grave!

Alone with the dying man, Lawton worked frantically with the strands beneath his hands. So many had been broken that it was easier now, despite his bleeding finger-tips and aching hands.

Presently Cloud had finished the grave, and he disappeared at the back. Hammering sounded. Was he building a coffin?

Lawton worked with desperate haste. Strand after strand parted in his bleeding fingers. The hole beneath him was growing.

Cloud came about an hour later with the coffin, placing it beside the dying man's hammock. The death-rattle still sounded, however, so Cloud went out, locking the door behind him. To Lawton's disappointment, he took his hammer with him.

Beads of perspiration stood out on Lawton's forehead as he struggled with the strands. Would the hammock part

now? He wrenched and shoved, twisted and squirmed. More strands parted. The hole widened. Another effort, and he felt space below him. Jack-knifing his body, he squeezed through the hole, head and feet last.

He struck the floor with a faint thump. Nerves taut, he listened. But no one seemed to have heard the sound.

Drenched, now that he had so nearly accomplished what he had set his heart on, Lawton drew his long arms down over his hips, and finally, by squirming and sweating, got his bound hands over his feet. His hands were now in front of him as he staggered to his feet, in a position where they might be of some use to him. If he only had that hammer!

Desperately, he scanned the room for a weapon. The board coffin! Lawton hobbled over to it, his heart pumping hard. If he could only tear off enough to use as a club! He wrenched at a board in the top.

And at that moment, he heard the stairs creak. Cloud! Lawton's heart jerked. He wrenched at the board, and the creak gave him away. A bellow sounded outside—a bellow that seemed to come from the negro's huge chest. The lock was rattling.

Lawton wrenched with all his strength, but Cloud had done too good a job of nailing. The board splintered off in a thin fragment. A blow from that long splinter would never bother Cloud for a moment!

But Lawton turned with it in his hands as the door swung open. A fragile hope! Cloud rushed toward him, his hammer raised for a blow.

The detective was raising his long, needle-pointed splinter. But he realized he could never get it up and down in time. Cloud's bare chest gave Lawton one of those split-second ideas which sometimes mean salvation.

He brought the splinter up suddenly. Cloud either failed to see the movement or in his blind rush believed the splinter unworthy of consideration. His charge brought his bare waist directly against the point of the splinter with tremendous force. Cloud's huge mouth opened with surprize and horror. A howl of rage ended on a scream of pain. Blood gushed from his stomach in a crimson stream.

Lawton, on the blunt end of the splinter, was hurled backward by the charge. And before he could gain his feet, he heard Doctor Zarchon's voice on the stairs.

The detective flung himself across the floor, crawling, and slammed the door. Cloud was writhing in pain, lying in a pool of his own blood. Doctor Sawyer was already dead. And Zarchon's heavy steps could be heard in the corridor. He was shouting questions at Cloud.

Lawton grasped the dropped hammer, and stood by the door. His pulses were pounding hard as he waited. A moment later, Doctor Zarchon kicked open the door. At sight of Lawton, his thick lips parted in surprize. But his surprize was only momentary. He brought up his automatic, firing at the detective's head. But for that try at the difficult head-shot, Lawton would have died at that moment.

But the bullet whined in his ear. And before a second shot could be fired, Lawton's two manacled hands, gripping the hammer tightly, completed their swift arc. The hammer was buried in that tangle of wild, black hair. The black hair was strained with red as the vampire-man slumped on the floor, already dead when he touched it.

Lawton took the madman's keys, unlocking his handcuffs to free ankles and

hands. And then he turned his attention to Cloud. But the negro was in the last throes of death, his eyes already glazing.

"And so," Lawton muttered reflectively, "the fly breaks the spider's web! And now, if I can find where Zarchon concealed those cars on his grounds, I can tell the boss that the case is closed."

Beyond the Black River

By ROBERT E. HOWARD

A thrilling novelette of the Picts and the wizard Zogar Sag—a startling weird saga of terrific adventures and dark magic

The Story Thus Far

BALTHUS, a young Aquilonian, was on his way to Fort Tuscelan, the westernmost outpost of the frontier province of Conajohara, when he was ambushed by a Pictish warrior from beyond Black River. Conan, a Cimmerian barbarian employed as a scout by Valannus, the governor of Conajohara, killed the Pict, and accompanied Balthus to the fort. On their way they came upon a wealthy merchant who had been beheaded by a hideous being that moved in a fiery mist, and which Conan called a swamp devil. This demon, he said, had been summoned by Zogar Sag, a Pictish wizard, to murder Zogar Sag's personal enemies among the Aquilonians, Valannus being one of these.

They arrived at the fort after dark, and Valannus revealed to them his fears that Zogar Sag's magic would cause the loss of the fort, and the conquest of Conajohara by the Picts who dwelt in the forests on the other side of Black River. In an effort to kill or capture the wizard, Conan set out with Balthus and a group of frontiersmen. They crossed the river and left Balthus and another man in the canoe, while Conan and the others started through the forest toward the wizard's village.

Picts, unseen in the darkness, stole up, cut the throat of Balthus' companion and knocked him senseless. He regained consciousness in the Pictish village, tied to a post, one of the men who had accompanied Conan was tied to another stake, and the heads of the others were heaped in a ghastly pyramid before him. The village was full of Pictish warriors from many tribes. Conan's band had run into an ambush.

By his magic Zogar Sag summoned a saber-tooth tiger out of the black jungle, which killed and dragged away the other prisoner, and then the wizard summoned a huge snake to devour Balthus. A spear thrown from the shadows transfixed the serpent, and then Conan, appearing unexpectedly, cut Balthus' bonds and hurried him away in the confusion. They fled through the altar-hut, where Conan killed a huge, shaggy, man-like thing, and fled into the forest, with the Picts howling behind them like so many devils.

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5. *The Children of Jhebbal Sag*

"WHICH way is the river?" Balthus was confused.

"We don't dare try for the river now," grunted Conan. "The woods between the village and the river are swarming with

This story began in WEIRD TALES for May.

"Fierce joy surged through him."

warriors. Come on! We'll head in the last direction they'll expect us to go—west!"

Looking back as they entered the thick growth, Balthus beheld the wall dotted with black heads as the savages peered over. The Picts were bewildered. They had not gained the wall in time to see the fugitives take cover. They had rushed to the wall expecting to repel an attack in force. They had seen the body of the dead warrior. But no enemy was in sight.

Balthus realized that they did not yet know their prisoner had escaped. From other sounds he believed that the warriors, directed by the shrill voice of Zogar Sag, were destroying the wounded serpent with arrows. The monster was out of the shaman's control. A moment later the quality of the yells was altered. Screeches of rage rose in the night.

Conan laughed grimly. He was leading Balthus along a narrow trail that ran west under the black branches, stepping as swiftly and surely as if he trod a well-

lighted thoroughfare. Balthus stumbled after him, guiding himself by feeling the dense wall on either hand.

"They'll be after us now. Zogar's discovered you're gone, and he knows my head wasn't in the pile before the altar-hut. The dog! If I'd had another spear I'd have thrown it through him before I struck the snake. Keep to the trail. They can't track us by torchlight, and there are a score of paths leading from the village. They'll follow those leading to the river first—throw a cordon of warriors for miles along the bank, expecting us to try to break through. We won't take to the woods until we have to. We can make better time on this trail. Now buckle down to it and run as you never ran before."

"They got over their panic cursed quick!" panted Balthus, complying with a fresh burst of speed.

"They're not afraid of anything, very long," grunted Conan.

For a space nothing was said between them. The fugitives devoted all their attention to covering distance. They were plunging deeper and deeper into the wilderness and getting farther away from civilization at every step, but Balthus did not question Conan's wisdom. The Cimmerian presently took time to grunt: "When we're far enough away from the village we'll swing back to the river in a big circle. No other village within miles of Gwawela. All the Picts are gathered in that vicinity. We'll circle wide around them. They can't track us until daylight. They'll pick up our path then, but before dawn we'll leave the trail and take to the woods."

They plunged on. The yells died out behind them. Balthus' breath was whistling through his teeth. He felt a pain in his side, and running became torture. He blundered against the bushes on each side of the trail. Conan pulled up suddenly, turned and stared back down the dim path.

Somewhere the moon was rising, a dim white glow amidst a tangle of branches.

"Shall we take to the woods?" panted Balthus.

"Give me your ax," murmured Conan softly. "Something is close behind us."

"Then we'd better leave the trail!" exclaimed Balthus.

Conan shook his head and drew his companion into a dense thicket. The moon rose higher, making a dim light in the path.

"We can't fight the whole tribe!" whispered Balthus.

"No human being could have found our trail so quickly, or followed us so swiftly," muttered Conan. "Keep silent."

There followed a tense silence in which Balthus felt that his heart could be heard pounding for miles away. Then abruptly, without a sound to announce its coming, a savage head appeared in the dim path. Balthus' heart jumped into his throat; at first glance he feared to look upon the awful head of the saber-tooth. But this head was smaller, more narrow; it was a leopard which stood there, snarling silently and glaring down the trail. What wind there was was blowing toward the hiding men, concealing their scent. The beast lowered his head and snuffed the trail, then moved forward uncertainly. A chill played down Balthus' spine. The brute was undoubtedly trailing them.

And it was suspicious. It lifted its head, its eyes glowing like balls of fire, and growled low in its throat. And at that instant Conan hurled the ax.

All the weight of arm and shoulder was behind the throw, and the ax was a streak of silver in the dim moon. Almost before he realized what had happened, Balthus saw the leopard rolling on the ground in its death-throes, the handle of the ax standing up from its head. The

head of the weapon had split its narrow skull.

Conan bounded from the bushes, wrenched his ax free and dragged the limp body in among the trees, concealing it from the casual glance.

"Now let's go, and go fast!" he grunted, leading the way southward, away from the trail. "There'll be warriors coming after that cat. As soon as he got his wits back Zogar sent him after us. The Picts would follow him, but he'd leave them far behind. He'd circle the village until he hit our trail and then come after us like a streak. They couldn't keep up with him, but they'll have an idea as to our general direction. They'd follow, listening for his cry. Well, they won't hear that, but they'll find the blood on the trail, and look around and find the body in the brush. They'll pick up our spoor there, if they can. Walk with care."

He avoided clinging briars and low-hanging branches effortlessly, gliding between trees without touching the stems and always planting his feet in the places calculated to show least evidence of his passing; but with Balthus it was slower, more laborious work.

NO SOUND came from behind them. They had covered more than a mile when Balthus said: "Does Zogar Sag catch leopard-cubs and train them for bloodhounds?"

Conan shook his head. "That was a leopard he called out of the woods."

"But," Balthus persisted, "if he can order the beasts to do his bidding, why doesn't he rouse them all and have them after us? The forest is full of leopards; why send only one after us?"

Conan did not reply for a space, and when he did it was with a curious reticence.

"He can't command all the animals. Only such as remember Jhebbal Sag."

"Jhebbal Sag?" Balthus repeated the ancient name hesitantly. He had never heard it spoken more than three or four times in his whole life.

"Once all living things worshipped him. That was long ago, when beasts and men spoke one language. Men have forgotten him; even the beasts forget. Only a few remember. The men who remember Jhebbal Sag and the beasts who remember are brothers and speak the same tongue."

Balthus did not reply; he had strained at a Pictish stake and seen the nighted jungle give up its fanged horrors at a shaman's call.

"Civilized men laugh," said Conan. "But not one can tell me how Zogar Sag can call pythons and tigers and leopards out of the wilderness and make them do his bidding. They would say it is a lie, if they dared. That's the way with civilized men. When they can't explain something by their half-baked science, they refuse to believe it."

The people on the Tauran were closer to the primitive than most Aquilonians; superstitions persisted, whose sources were lost in antiquity. And Balthus had seen that which still prickled his flesh. He could not refute the monstrous thing which Conan's words implied.

"I've heard that there's an ancient grove sacred to Jhebbal Sag somewhere in this forest," said Conan. "I don't know. I've never seen it. But more beasts *remember* in this country than any I've ever seen."

"Then others will be on our trail?"

"They are now," was Conan's disquieting answer. "Zogar would never leave our tracking to one beast alone."

"What are we to do, then?" asked Balthus uneasily, grasping his ax as he stared at the gloomy arches above him. His flesh crawled with the momentary

expectation of ripping talons and fangs leaping from the shadows.

"Wait!"

Conan turned, squatted and with his knife began scratching a curious symbol in the mold. Stooping to look at it over his shoulder, Balthus felt a crawling of the flesh along his spine, he knew not why. He felt no wind against his face, but there was a rustling of leaves above them and a weird moaning swept ghostlily through the branches. Conan glanced up inscrutably, then rose and stood staring somberly down at the symbol he had drawn.

"What is *it?*" whispered Balthus. It looked archaic and meaningless to him. He supposed that it was his ignorance of artistry which prevented his identifying it as one of the conventional designs of some prevailing culture. But had he been the most erudite artist in the world, he would have been no nearer the solution.

"I saw it carved in the rock of a cave no human had visited for a million years," muttered Conan, "in the uninhabited mountains beyond the Sea of Vilayet, half a world away from this spot. Later I saw a black witch-finder of Kush scratch it in the sand of a nameless river. He told me part of its meaning—it's sacred to Jhebbal Sag and the creatures which worship him. Watch!"

They drew back among the dense foliage some yards away and waited in tense silence. To the east drums muttered and somewhere to north and west other drums answered. Balthus shivered, though he knew long miles of black forest separated him from the grim beaters of those drums whose dull pulsing was a sinister overture that set the dark stage for bloody drama.

Balthus found himself holding his breath. Then with a slight shaking of the leaves, the bushes parted and a magnificent panther came into view. The moonlight dappling through the leaves shone on its glossy coat rippling with the play of the great muscles beneath it.

With its head held low it glided toward them. It was smelling out their trail. Then it halted as if frozen, its muzzle almost touching the symbol cut in the mold. For a long space it crouched motionless; it flattened its long body and laid its head on the ground before the mark. And Balthus felt the short hairs stir on his scalp. For the attitude of the great carnivore was one of awe and adoration.

Then the panther rose and backed away carefully, belly almost to the ground. With his hind-quarters among the bushes he wheeled as if in sudden panic and was gone like a flash of dappled light.

Balthus mopped his brow with a trembling hand and glanced at Conan.

The barbarian's eyes were smoldering with fires that never lit the eyes of men bred to the ideas of civilization. In that instant he was all wild, and had forgotten the man at his side. In his burning gaze Balthus glimpsed and vaguely recognized pristine images and half-embodied memories, shadows from Life's dawn, forgotten and repudiated by sophisticated races—ancient, primeval fantasms unnamed and nameless.

Then the deeper fires were masked and Conan was silently leading the way deeper into the forest.

"We've no more to fear from the beasts," he said after a while, "but we've left a sign for men to read. They won't follow our trail very easily, and until they find that symbol they won't know for sure we've turned south. Even then it won't be easy to smell us out without the beasts to aid them. But the woods south of the trail will be full of warriors looking for us. If we keep moving after daylight, we'll be sure to run into some of them. As soon as we find a good place

we'll hide and wait until another night to swing back and make the river. We've got to warn Valannus, but it won't help him any if we get ourselves killed."

"Warn Valannus?"

"Hell, the woods along the river are swarming with Picts! That's why they got us. Zogar's brewing war-magic; no mere raid this time. He's done something no Pict has done in my memory—united as many as fifteen or sixteen clans. His magic did it; they'll follow a wizard farther than they will a war-chief. You saw the mob in the village; and there were hundreds hiding along the river bank that you didn't see. More coming, from the farther villages. He'll have at least three thousand fighting-men. I lay in the bushes and heard their talk as they went past. They mean to attack the fort; when, I don't know, but Zogar doesn't dare delay long. He's gathered them and whipped them into a frenzy. If he doesn't lead them into battle quickly, they'll fall to quarreling with one another. They're like blood-mad tigers.

"I don't know whether they can take the fort or not. Anyway, we've got to get back across the river and give the warning. The settlers on the Velitrium road must either get into the fort or back to Velitrium. While the Picts are besieging the fort, war-parties will range the road far to the east—might even cross Thunder River and raid the thickly settled country behind Velitrium."

As he talked he was leading the way deeper and deeper into the ancient wilderness. Presently he grunted with satisfaction. They had reached a spot where the underbrush was more scattered, and an outcropping of stone was visible, wandering off southward. Balthus felt more secure as they followed it. Not even a Pict could trail them over naked rock.

"How did you get away?" he asked presently.

Conan tapped his mail-shirt and helmet.

"If more borderers would wear harness there'd be fewer skulls hanging on the altar-huts. But most men make noise if they wear armor. They were waiting on each side of the path, without moving. And when a Pict stands motionless, the very beasts of the forest pass him without seeing him. They'd seen us crossing the river and got in their places. If they'd gone into ambush after we left the bank, I'd have had some hint of it. But they were waiting, and not even a leaf trembled. The devil himself couldn't have suspected anything. The first suspicion I had was when I heard a shaft rasp against a bow as it was pulled back. I dropped and yelled for the men behind me to drop, but they were too slow, taken by surprize like that.

"Most of them fell at the first volley that raked us from both sides. Some of the arrows crossed the trail and struck Picts on the other side. I heard them howl." He grinned with vicious satisfaction. "Such of us as were left plunged into the woods and closed with them. When I saw the others were all down or taken, I broke through and outfooted the painted devils through the darkness. They were all around me. I ran and crawled and sneaked, and sometimes I lay on my belly under the bushes while they passed me on all sides.

"I tried for the shore and found it lined with them, waiting for just such a move. But I'd have cut my way through and taken a chance on swimming, only I heard the drums pounding in the village and knew they'd taken somebody alive.

"They were all so engrossed in Zogar's magic that I was able to climb the wall behind the altar-hut. There was a warrior supposed to be watching at that point, but he was squatting behind the hut and peer-

ing around the corner at the ceremony. I came up behind him and broke his neck with my hands before he knew what was happening. It was his spear I threw into the snake, and that's his ax you're carrying."

"But what was that—that thing you killed in the altar-hut?" asked Balthus, with a shiver at the memory of the dim-seen horror.

"One of Zogar's gods. One of Jhebbal's children that didn't remember and had to be kept chained to the altar. A bull ape. The Picts think they're sacred to the Hairy One who lives on the moon —the gorilla-god of Gullah.

"It's getting light. Here's a good place to hide until we see how close they're on our trail. Probably have to wait until night to break back to the river."

A LOW hill pitched upward, girdled and covered with thick trees and bushes. Near the crest Conan slid into a tangle of jutting rocks, crowned by dense bushes. Lying among them they could see the jungle below without being seen. It was a good place to hide or defend. Balthus did not believe that even a Pict could have trailed them over the rocky ground for the past four or five miles, but he was afraid of the beasts that obeyed Zogar Sag. His faith in the curious symbol wavered a little now. But Conan had dismissed the possibility of beasts tracking them.

A ghostly whiteness spread through the dense branches; the patches of sky visible altered in hue, grew from pink to blue. Balthus felt the gnawing of hunger, though he had slaked his thirst at a stream they had skirted. There was complete silence, except for an occasional chirp of a bird. The drums were no longer to be heard. Balthus' thoughts reverted to the grim scene before the altar-hut.

"Those were ostrich plumes Zogar Sag wore," he said. "I've seen them on the helmets of knights who rode from the East to visit the barons of the marches. There are no ostriches in this forest, are there?"

"They came from Kush," answered Conan. "West of here, many marches, lies the seashore. Ships from Zingara occasionally come and trade weapons and ornaments and wine to the coastal tribes for skins and copper ore and gold dust. Sometimes they trade ostrich plumes they got from the Stygians, who in turn got them from the black tribes of Kush, which lies south of Stygia. The Pictish shamans place great store by them. But there's much risk in such trade. The Picts are too likely to try to seize the ship. And the coast is dangerous to ships. I've sailed along it when I was with the pirates of the Barachan Isles, which lie southwest of Zingara."

Balthus looked at his companion with admiration.

"I knew you hadn't spent your life on this frontier. You've mentioned several far places. You've traveled widely?"

"I've roamed far; farther than any other man of my race ever wandered. I've seen all the great cities of the Hyborians, the Shemites, the Stygians and the Hyrkanians. I've roamed in the unknown countries south of the black kingdoms of Kush, and east of the Sea of Vilayet. I've been a mercenary captain, a corsair, a *kozak,* a penniless vagabond, a general—hell, I've been everything except a king, and I may be that, before I die." The fancy pleased him, and he grinned hardly. Then he shrugged his shoulders and stretched his mighty figure on the rocks. "This is as good life as any. I don't know how long I'll stay on the frontier; a week, a month, a year. I have a roving foot.

But it's as well on the border as anywhere."

Balthus set himself to watch the forest below them. Momentarily he expected to see fierce painted faces thrust through the leaves. But as the hours passed no stealthy footfall disturbed the brooding quiet. Balthus believed the Picts had missed their trail and given up the chase. Conan grew restless.

"We should have sighted parties scouring the woods for us. If they've quit the chase, it's because they're after bigger game. They may be gathering to cross the river and storm the fort."

"Would they come this far south if they lost the trail?"

"They've lost the trail, all right; otherwise they'd have been on our necks before now. Under ordinary circumstances they'd scour the woods for miles in every direction. Some of them should have passed within sight of this hill. They must be preparing to cross the river. We've got to take a chance and make for the river."

Creeping down the rocks Balthus felt his flesh crawl between his shoulders as he momentarily expected a withering blast of arrows from the green masses about them. He feared that the Picts had discovered them and were lying about in ambush. But Conan was convinced no enemies were near, and the Cimmerian was right.

"We're miles to the south of the village," grunted Conan. "We'll hit straight through for the river. I don't know how far down the river they've spread. We'll hope to hit it below them."

With haste that seemed reckless to Balthus they hurried eastward. The woods seemed empty of life. Conan believed that all the Picts were gathered in the vicinity of Gwawela, if, indeed, they had not already crossed the river. He did not believe they would cross in the daytime, however.

"Some woodsman would be sure to see them and give the alarm. They'll cross above and below the fort, out of sight of the sentries. Then others will get in canoes and make straight across for the river wall. As soon as they attack, those hidden in the woods on the east shore will assail the fort from the other sides. They've tried that before, and got the guts shot and hacked out of them. But this time they've got enough men to make a real onslaught of it."

They pushed on without pausing, though Balthus gazed longingly at the squirrels flitting among the branches, which he could have brought down with a cast of his ax. With a sigh he drew up his broad belt. The everlasting silence and gloom of the primitive forest was beginning to depress him. He found himself thinking of the open groves and sun-dappled meadows of the Tauran, of the bluff cheer of his father's steep-thatched, diamond-paned house, of the fat cows browsing through the deep, lush grass, and the hearty fellowship of the brawny, bare-armed plowmen and herdsmen.

He felt lonely, in spite of his companion. Conan was as much a part of this wilderness as Balthus was alien to it. The Cimmerian might have spent years among the great cities of the world; he might have walked with the rulers of civilization; he might even achieve his wild whim some day and rule as king of a civilized nation; stranger things had happened. But he was no less a barbarian. He was concerned only with the naked fundamentals of life. The warm intimacies of small, kindly things, the sentiments and delicious trivialities that make up so much of civilized men's lives were meaningless to him. A wolf was no less a wolf because a whim of chance caused him to

run with the watch-dogs. Bloodshed and violence and savagery were the natural elements of the life Conan knew; he could not, and would never, understand the little things that are so dear to civilized men and women.

THE shadows were lengthening when they reached the river and peered through the masking bushes. They could see up and down the river for about a mile each way. The sullen stream lay bare and empty. Conan scowled across at the other shore.

"We've got to take another chance here. We've got to swim the river. We don't know whether they've crossed or not. The woods over there may be alive with them. We've got to risk it. We're about six miles south of Gwawela."

He wheeled and ducked as a bowstring twanged. Something like a white flash of light streaked through the bushes. Balthus knew it was an arrow. Then with a tigerish bound Conan was through the bushes. Balthus caught the gleam of steel as he whirled his sword, and heard a death scream. The next instant he had broken through the bushes after the Cimmerian.

A Pict with a shattered skull lay face-down on the ground, his fingers spasmodically clawing at the grass. Half a dozen others were swarming about Conan, swords and axes lifted. They had cast away their bows, useless at such deadly close quarters. Their lower jaws were painted white, contrasting vividly with their dark faces, and the designs on their muscular breasts differed from any Balthus had ever seen.

One of them hurled his ax at Balthus and rushed after it with lifted knife. Balthus ducked and then caught the wrist that drove the knife licking at his throat. They went to the ground together, rolling over and over. The Pict was like a wild beast, his muscles hard as steel strings.

Balthus was striving to maintain his hold on the wild man's wrist and bring his own ax into play, but so fast and furious was the struggle that each attempt to strike was blocked. The Pict was wrenching furiously to free his knife hand, was clutching at Balthus' ax, and driving his knees at the youth's groin. Suddenly he attempted to shift his knife to his free hand, and in that instant Balthus, struggling up on one knee, split the painted head with a desperate blow of his ax.

He sprang up and glared wildly about for his companion, expecting to see him overwhelmed by numbers. Then he realized the full strength and ferocity of the Cimmerian. Conan bestrode two of his attackers, shorn half asunder by that terrible broadsword. As Balthus looked he saw the Cimmerian beat down a thrusting shortsword, avoid the stroke of an ax with a cat-like sidewise spring which brought him within arm's length of a squat savage stooping for a bow. Before the Pict could straighten, the red sword flailed down and clove him from shoulder to mid-breastbone, where the blade stuck. The remaining warriors rushed in, one from either side. Balthus hurled his ax with an accuracy that reduced the attackers to one, and Conan, abandoning his efforts to free his sword, wheeled and met the remaining Pict with his bare hands. The stocky warrior, a head shorter than his tall enemy, leaped in, striking with his ax, at the same time stabbing murderously with his knife. The knife broke on the Cimmerian's mail, and the ax checked in midair as Conan's fingers locked like iron on the descending arm. A bone snapped loudly, and Balthus saw the Pict wince and falter. The next instant he was swept off his feet, lifted high

above the Cimmerian's head—he writhed in midair for an instant, kicking and thrashing, and then was dashed headlong to the earth with such force that he rebounded, and then lay still, his limp posture telling of splintered limbs and a broken spine.

"Come on!" Conan wrenched his sword free and snatched up an ax. "Grab a bow and a handful of arrows, and hurry! We've got to trust to our heels again. That yell was heard. They'll be here in no time. If we tried to swim now, they'd feather us with arrows before we reached midstream!"

6. *Red Axes of the Border*

CONAN did not plunge deeply into the forest. A few hundred yards from the river, he altered his slanting course and ran parallel with it. Balthus recognized a grim determination not to be hunted away from the river which they must cross if they were to warn the men in the fort. Behind them rose more loudly the yells of the forest men. Balthus believed the Picts had reached the glade where the bodies of the slain men lay. Then further yells seemed to indicate that the savages were streaming into the woods in pursuit. They had left a trail any Pict could follow.

Conan increased his speed, and Balthus grimly set his teeth and kept on his heels, though he felt he might collapse any time. It seemed centuries since he had eaten last. He kept going more by an effort of will than anything else. His blood was pounding so furiously in his ear-drums that he was not aware when the yells died out behind them.

Conan halted suddenly. Balthus leaned against a tree and panted.

"They've quit!" grunted the Cimmerian, scowling.

"Sneaking—up—on—us!" gasped Balthus.

Conan shook his head.

"A short chase like this they'd yell every step of the way. No. They've gone back. I thought I heard somebody yelling behind them a few seconds before the noise began to get dimmer. They've been recalled. And that's good for us, but damned bad for the men in the fort. It means the warriors are being summoned out of the woods for the attack. Those men we ran into were warriors from a tribe down the river. They were undoubtedly headed for Gwawela to join in the assault on the fort. Damn it, we're farther away than ever, now. We've got to get across the river."

Turning east he hurried through the thickets with no attempt at concealment. Balthus followed him, for the first time feeling the sting of lacerations on his breast and shoulder where the Pict's savage teeth had scored him. He was pushing through the thick bushes that fringed the bank when Conan pulled him back. Then he heard a rhythmic splashing, and peering through the leaves, saw a dugout canoe coming up the river, its single occupant paddling hard against the current. He was a strongly built Pict with a white heron feather thrust in a copper band that confined his square-cut mane.

"That's a Gwawela man," muttered Conan. "Emissary from Zogar. White plume shows that. He's carried a peace talk to the tribes down the river and now he's trying to get back and take a hand in the slaughter."

The lone ambassador was now almost even with their hiding-place, and suddenly Balthus almost jumped out of his skin. At his very ear had sounded the harsh gutturals of a Pict. Then he realized that Conan had called to the paddler in his own tongue. The man started,

scanned the bushes and called back something, then cast a startled glance across the river, bent low and sent the canoe shooting in toward the western bank. Not understanding, Balthus saw Conan take from his hand the bow he had picked up in the glade, and notch an arrow.

The Pict had run his canoe in close to the shore, and staring up into the bushes, called out something. His answer came in the twang of the bow-string, the streaking flight of the arrow that sank to the feathers in his broad breast. With a choking gasp he slumped sidewise and rolled into the shallow water. In an instant Conan was down the bank and wading into the water to grasp the drifting canoe. Balthus stumbled after him and somewhat dazedly crawled into the canoe. Conan scrambled in, seized the paddle and sent the craft shooting toward the eastern shore. Balthus noted with envious admiration the play of the great muscles beneath the sun-burnt skin. The Cimmerian seemed an iron man, who never knew fatigue.

"What did you say to the Pict?" asked Balthus.

"Told him to pull into shore; said there was a white forest runner on the bank who was trying to get a shot at him."

"That doesn't seem fair," Balthus objected. "He thought a friend was speaking to him. You mimicked a Pict perfectly——"

"We needed his boat," grunted Conan, not pausing in his exertions. "Only way to lure him to the bank. Which is worse —to betray a Pict who'd enjoy skinning us both alive, or betray the men across the river whose lives depend on our getting over?"

Balthus mulled over this delicate ethical question for a moment, then shrugged his shoulder and asked: "How far are we from the fort?"

Conan pointed to a creek which flowed into Black River from the east, a few hundred yards below them.

"That's South Creek; it's ten miles from its mouth to the fort. It's the southern boundary of Conajohara. Marshes miles wide south of it. No danger of a raid from across them. Nine miles above the fort North Creek forms the other boundary. Marshes beyond that, too. That's why an attack must come from the west, across Black River. Conajohara's just like a spear, with a point nineteen miles wide, thrust into the Pictish wilderness."

"Why don't we keep to the canoe and make the trip by water?"

"Because, considering the current we've got to brace, and the bends in the river, we can go faster afoot. Besides, remember Gwawela is south of the fort; if the Picts are crossing the river we'd run right into them."

DUSK was gathering as they stepped upon the eastern bank. Without pause Conan pushed on northward, at a pace that made Balthus' sturdy legs ache.

"Valannus wanted a fort built at the mouths of North and South Creeks," grunted the Cimmerian. "Then the river could be patrolled constantly. But the Government wouldn't do it.

"Soft-bellied fools sitting on velvet cushions with naked girls offering them iced wine on their knees—I know the breed. They can't see any farther than their palace wall. Diplomacy — hell! They'd fight Picts with theories of territorial expansion. Valannus and men like him have to obey the orders of a set of damned fools. They'll never grab any more Pictish land, any more than they'll ever rebuild Venarium. The time may

come when they'll see the barbarians swarming over the walls of the Eastern cities!"

A week before, Balthus would have laughed at any such preposterous suggestion. Now he made no reply. He had seen the unconquerable ferocity of the men who dwelt beyond the frontiers.

He shivered, casting glances at the sullen river, just visible through the bushes, at the arches of the trees which crowded close to its banks. He kept remembering that the Picts might have crossed the river and be lying in ambush between them and the fort. It was fast growing dark.

A slight sound ahead of them jumped his heart into his throat, and Conan's sword gleamed in the air. He lowered it when a dog, a great, gaunt, scarred beast, slunk out of the bushes and stood staring at them.

"That dog belonged to a settler who tried to build his cabin on the bank of the river a few miles south of the fort," grunted Conan. "The Picts slipped over and killed him, of course, and burned his cabin. We found him dead among the embers, and the dog lying senseless among three Picts he'd killed. He was almost cut to pieces. We took him to the fort and dressed his wounds, but after he recovered he took to the woods and turned wild.—What now, Slasher, are you hunting the men who killed your master?"

The massive head swung from side to side and the eyes glowed greenly. He did not growl or bark. Silently as a phantom he slid in behind them.

"Let him come," muttered Conan. "He can smell the devils before we can see them."

Balthus smiled and laid his hand caressingly on the dog's head. The lips involuntarily writhed back to display the gleaming fangs; then the great beast bent his head sheepishly, and his tail moved with jerky uncertainty, as if the owner had almost forgotten the emotions of friendliness. Balthus mentally compared the great gaunt hard body with the fat sleek hounds tumbling vociferously over one another in his father's kennel yard. He sighed. The frontier was no less hard for beasts than for men. This dog had almost forgotten the meaning of kindness and friendliness.

Slasher glided ahead, and Conan let him take the lead. The last tinge of dusk faded into stark darkness. The miles fell away under their steady feet. Slasher seemed voiceless. Suddenly he halted, tense, ears lifted. An instant later the men heard it—a demoniac yelling up the river ahead of them, faint as a whisper.

Conan swore like a madman.

"They've attacked the fort! We're too late! Come on!"

He increased his pace, trusting to the dog to smell out ambushes ahead. In a flood of tense excitement Balthus forgot his hunger and weariness. The yells grew louder as they advanced, and above the devilish screaming they could hear the deep shouts of the soldiers. Just as Balthus began to fear they would run into the savages who seemed to be howling just ahead of them, Conan swung away from the river in a wide semicircle that carried them to a low rise from which they could look over the forest. They saw the fort, lighted with torches thrust over the parapets on long poles. These cast a flickering, uncertain light over the clearing, and in that light they saw throngs of naked, painted figures along the fringe of the clearing. The river swarmed with canoes. The Picts had the fort completely surrounded.

An incessant hail of arrows rained against the stockade from the woods and the river. The deep twanging of the bow-

strings rose above the howling. Yelling like wolves, several hundred naked warriors with axes in their hands ran from under the trees and raced toward the eastern gate. They were within a hundred and fifty yards of their objective when a withering blast of arrows from the wall littered the ground with corpses and sent the survivors fleeing back to the trees. The men in the canoes rushed their boats toward the river-wall, and were met by another shower of clothyard shafts and a volley from the small ballistas mounted on towers on that side of the stockade. Stones and logs whirled through the air and splintered and sank half a dozen canoes, killing their occupants, and the other boats drew back out of range. A deep roar of triumph rose from the walls of the fort, answered by bestial howling from all quarters.

"Shall we try to break through?" asked Balthus, trembling with eagerness.

Conan shook his head. He stood with his arms folded, his head slightly bent, a somber and brooding figure.

"The fort's doomed. The Picts are blood-mad, and won't stop until they're all killed. And there are too many of them for the men in the fort to kill. We couldn't break through, and if we did, we could do nothing but die with Valannus."

"There's nothing we can do but save our own hides, then?"

"Yes. We've got to warn the settlers. Do you know why the Picts are not trying to burn the fort with fire-arrows? Because they don't want a flame that might warn the people to the east. They plan to stamp out the fort, and then sweep east before anyone knows of its fall. They may cross Thunder River and take Velitrium before the people know what's happened. At least they'll destroy every living thing between the fort and Thunder River.

"We've failed to warn the fort, and I see now it would have done no good if we had succeeded. The fort's too poorly manned. A few more charges and the Picts will be over the walls and breaking down the gates. But we can start the settlers toward Velitrium. Come on! We're outside the circle the Picts have thrown around the fort. We'll keep clear of it."

THEY swung out in a wide arc, hearing the rising and falling of the volume of the yells, marking each charge and repulse. The men in the fort were holding their own; but the shrieks of the Picts did not diminish in savagery. They vibrated with a timbre that held assurance of ultimate victory.

Before Balthus realized they were close to it, they broke into the road leading east.

"Now run!" grunted Conan. Balthus set his teeth. It was nineteen miles to Velitrium, a good five to Scalp Creek beyond which began the settlements. It seemed to the Aquilonian that they had been fighting and running for centuries. But the nervous excitement that rioted through his blood stimulated him to herculean efforts.

Slasher ran ahead of them, his head to the ground, snarling low, the first sound they had heard from him.

"Picts ahead of us!" snarled Conan, dropping to one knee and scanning the ground in the starlight. He shook his head, baffled. "I can't tell how many. Probably only a small party. Some that couldn't wait to take the fort. They've gone ahead to butcher the settlers in their beds! Come on!"

Ahead of them presently they saw a small blaze through the trees, and heard a wild and ferocious chanting. The trail bent there, and leaving it, they cut across the bend, through the thickets. A few

moments later they were looking on a hideous sight. An ox-wain stood in the road piled with meager household furnishings; it was burning; the oxen lay near with their throats cut. A man and a woman lay in the road, stripped and mutilated. Five Picts were dancing about them with fantastic leaps and bounds, waving bloody axes; one of them brandished the woman's red-smeared gown.

At the sight a red haze swam before Balthus. Lifting his bow he lined the prancing figure, black against the fire, and loosed. The slayer leaped convulsively and fell dead with the arrow through his heart. Then the two white men and the dog were upon the startled survivors. Conan was animated merely by his fighting spirit and an old, old racial hate, but Balthus was afire with wrath.

He met the first Pict to oppose him with a ferocious swipe that split the painted skull, and sprang over his falling body to grapple with the others. But Conan had already killed one of the two he had chosen, and the leap of the Aquilonian was a second late. The warrior was down with the long sword through him even as Balthus' ax was lifted. Turning toward the remaining Pict, Balthus saw Slasher rise from his victim, his great jaws dripping blood.

Balthus said nothing as he looked down at the pitiful forms in the road beside the burning wain. Both were young, the woman little more than a girl. By some whim of chance the Picts had left her face unmarred, and even in the agonies of an awful death it was beautiful. But her soft young body had been hideously slashed with many knives—a mist clouded Balthus' eyes and he swallowed chokingly. The tragedy momentarily overcame him. He felt like falling upon the ground and weeping and biting the earth.

"Some young couple just hitting out on their own," Conan was saying as he wiped his sword unemotionally. "On their way to the fort when the Picts met them. Maybe the boy was going to enter the service; maybe take up land on the river. Well, that's what will happen to every man, woman and child this side of Thunder River if we don't get them into Velitrium in a hurry."

Balthus' knees trembled as he followed Conan. But there was no hint of weakness in the long easy stride of the Cimmerian. There was a kinship between him and the great gaunt brute that glided beside him. Slasher no longer growled with his head to the trail. The way was clear before them. The yelling on the river came faintly to them, but Balthus believed the fort was still holding. Conan halted suddenly, with an oath.

He showed Balthus a trail that led north from the road. It was an old trail, partly grown with new young growth, and this growth had recently been broken down. Balthus realized this fact more by feel than sight, though Conan seemed to see like a cat in the dark. The Cimmerian showed him where broad wagon tracks turned off the main trail, deeply indented in the forest mold.

"Settlers going to the licks after salt," he grunted. "They're at the edges of the marsh, about nine miles from here. Blast it! They'll be cut off and butchered to a man! Listen! One man can warn the people on the road. Go ahead and wake them up and herd them into Velitrium. I'll go and get the men gathering the salt. They'll be camped by the licks. We won't come back to the road. We'll head straight through the woods."

With no further comment Conan turned off the trail and hurried down the dim path, and Balthus, after staring after him for a few moments, set out along the

road. The dog had remained with him, and glided softly at his heels. When Balthus had gone a few rods he heard the animal growl. Whirling, he glared back the way he had come, and was startled to see a vague ghostly glow vanishing into the forest in the direction Conan had taken. Slasher rumbled deep in his throat, his hackles stiff and his eyes balls of green fire. Balthus remembered the grim apparition that had taken the head of the merchant Tiberias not far from that spot, and he hesitated. The thing must be following Conan. But the giant Cimmerian had repeatedly demonstrated his ability to take care of himself, and Balthus felt his duty lay toward the helpless settlers who slumbered in the path of the red hurricane. The horror of the fiery phantom was overshadowed by the horror of those limp, violated bodies beside the burning ox-wain.

He hurried down the road, crossed Scalp Creek and came in sight of the first settler's cabin—a long, low structure of ax-hewn logs. In an instant he was pounding on the door. A sleepy voice inquired his pleasure.

"Get up! The Picts are over the river!"

That brought instant response. A low cry echoed his words and then the door was thrown open by a woman in a scanty shift. Her hair hung over her bare shoulders in disorder; she held a candle in one hand and an ax in the other. Her face was colorless, her eyes wide with terror.

"Come in!" she begged. "We'll hold the cabin."

"No. We must make for Velitrium. The fort can't hold them back. It may have fallen already. Don't stop to dress. Get your children and come on."

"But my man's gone with the others after salt!" she wailed, wringing her hands. Behind her peered three tousled youngsters, blinking and bewildered.

"Conan's gone after them. He'll fetch them through safe. We must hurry up the road to warn the other cabins."

Relief flooded her countenance.

"Mitra be thanked!" she cried. "If the Cimmerian's gone after them, they're safe if mortal man can save them!"

In a whirlwind of activity she snatched up the smallest child and herded the others through the door ahead of her. Balthus took the candle and ground it out under his heel. He listened an instant. No sound came up the dark road.

"Have you got a horse?"

"In the stable," she groaned. "Oh, hurry!"

He pushed her aside as she fumbled with shaking hands at the bars. He led the horse out and lifted the children on its back, telling them to hold to its mane and to one another. They stared at him seriously, making no outcry. The woman took the horse's halter and set out up the road. She still gripped her ax and Balthus knew that if cornered she would fight with the desperate courage of a she-panther.

He held behind, listening. He was oppressed by the belief that the fort had been stormed and taken; that the dark-skinned hordes were already streaming up the road toward Velitrium, drunken on slaughter and mad for blood. They would come with the speed of starving wolves.

Presently they saw another cabin looming ahead. The woman started to shriek a warning, but Balthus stopped her. He hurried to the door and knocked. A woman's voice answered him. He repeated his warning, and soon the cabin disgorged its occupants—an old woman, two young women and four children. Like the other woman's husband, their men had gone to the salt licks the day

before, unsuspecting of any danger. One of the young women seemed dazed, the other prone to hysteria. But the old woman, a stern old veteran of the frontier, quieted them harshly; she helped Balthus get out the two horses that were stabled in a pen behind the cabin and put the children on them. Balthus urged that she herself mount with them, but she shook her head and made one of the younger women ride.

"She's with child," grunted the old woman. "I can walk—and fight, too, if it comes to that."

As they set out, one of the young women said: "A young couple passed along the road about dusk; we advised them to spend the night at our cabin, but they were anxious to make the fort tonight. Did—did——"

"They met the Picts," answered Balthus briefly, and the woman sobbed in horror.

They were scarcely out of sight of the cabin when some distance behind them quavered a long high-pitched yell.

"A wolf!" exclaimed one of the women.

"A painted wolf with an ax in his hand," muttered Balthus. "Go! Rouse the other settlers along the road and take them with you. I'll scout along behind."

Without a word the old woman herded her charges ahead of her. As they faded into the darkness, Balthus could see the pale ovals that were the faces of the children twisted back over their shoulders to stare toward him. He remembered his own people on the Tauran and a moment's giddy sickness swam over him. With momentary weakness he groaned and sank down in the road; his muscular arm fell over Slasher's massive neck and he felt the dog's warm moist tongue touch his face.

He lifted his head and grinned with a painful effort.

"Come on, boy," he mumbled, rising. "We've got work to do."

A RED glow suddenly became evident through the trees. The Picts had fired the last hut. He grinned. How Zogar Sag would froth if he knew his warriors had let their destructive natures get the better of them. The fire would warn the people farther up the road. They would be awake and alert when the fugitives reached them. But his face grew grim. The women were traveling slowly, on foot and on the overloaded horses. The swift-footed Picts would run them down within a mile, unless—he took his position behind a tangle of fallen logs beside the trail. The road west of him was lighted by the burning cabin, and when the Picts came he saw them first—black furtive figures etched against the distant glare.

Drawing a shaft to the head, he loosed and one of the figures crumpled. The rest melted into the woods on either side of the road. Slasher whimpered with the killing lust beside him. Suddenly a figure appeared on the fringe of the trail, under the trees, and began gliding toward the fallen timbers. Balthus' bow-string twanged and the Pict yelped, staggered and fell into the shadows with the arrow through his thigh. Slasher cleared the timbers with a bound and leaped into the bushes. They were violently shaken and then the dog slunk back to Balthus' side, his jaws crimson.

No more appeared in the trail; Balthus began to fear they were stealing past his position through the woods, and when he heard a faint sound to his left he loosed blindly. He cursed as he heard the shaft splinter against a tree, but Slasher glided away as silently as a phantom, and pres-

ently Balthus heard a thrashing and a gurgling; then Slasher came like a ghost through the bushes, snuggling his great, crimson-stained head against Balthus' arm. Blood oozed from a gash in his shoulder, but the sounds in the wood had ceased for ever.

The men lurking on the edges of the road evidently sensed the fate of their companion, and decided that an open charge was preferable to being dragged down in the dark by a devil-beast they could neither see nor hear. Perhaps they realized that only one man lay behind the logs. They came with a sudden rush, breaking cover from both sides of the trail. Three dropped with arrows through them—and the remaining pair hesitated. One turned and ran back down the road, but the other lunged over the breastwork, his eyes and teeth gleaming in the dim light, his ax lifted. Balthus' foot slipped as he sprang up, but the slip saved his life. The descending ax shaved a lock of hair from his head, and the Pict rolled down the logs from the force of his wasted blow. Before he could regain his feet Slasher tore his throat out.

Then followed a tense period of waiting, in which time Balthus wondered if the man who had fled had been the only survivor of the party. Obviously it had been a small band that had either left the fighting at the fort, or was scouting ahead of the main body. Each moment that passed increased the chances for safety of the women and children hurrying toward Velitrium.

Then without warning a shower of arrows whistled over his retreat. A wild howling rose from the woods along the trail. Either the survivor had gone after aid, or another party had joined the first. The burning cabin still smoldered, lending a little light. Then they were after him, gliding through the trees beside the trail. He shot three arrows and threw the bow away. As if sensing his plight, they came on, not yelling now, but in deadly silence except for a swift pad of many feet.

He fiercely hugged the head of the great dog growling at his side, muttered: "All right, boy, give 'em hell!" and sprang to his feet, drawing his ax. Then the dark figures flooded over the breastworks and closed in a storm of flailing axes, stabbing knives and ripping fangs.

7. *The Devil in the Fire*

When Conan turned from the Velitrium road he expected a run of some nine miles and set himself to the task. But he had not gone four when he heard the sounds of a party of men ahead of him. From the noise they were making in their progress he knew they were not Picts. He hailed them.

"Who's there?" challenged a harsh voice. "Stand where you are until we know you, or you'll get an arrow through you."

"You couldn't hit an elephant in this darkness," answered Conan impatiently. "Come on, fool; it's I—Conan. The Picts are over the river."

"We suspected as much," answered the leader of the men, as they strode forward—tall, rangy men, stern-faced, with bows in their hands. "One of our party wounded an antelope and tracked it nearly to Black River. He heard them yelling down the river and ran back to our camp. We left the salt and the wagons, turned the oxen loose and came as swiftly as we could. If the Picts are besieging the fort, war-parties will be ranging up the road toward our cabins."

"Your families are safe," grunted Conan. "My companion went ahead to take them to Velitrium. If we go back to

the main road we may run into the whole horde. We'll strike southeast, through the timber. Go ahead. I'll scout behind."

A few moments later the whole band was hurrying southeastward. Conan followed more slowly, keeping just within ear-shot. He cursed the noise they were making; that many Picts or Cimmerians would have moved through the woods with no more noise than the wind makes as it blows through the black branches.

He had just crossed a small glade when he wheeled, answering the conviction of his primitive instincts that he was being followed. Standing motionless among the bushes he heard the sounds of the retreating settlers fade away. Then a voice called faintly back along the way he had come: "Conan! Conan! Wait for me, Conan!"

"Balthus!" he swore bewilderedly. Cautiously he called: "Here I am!"

"Wait for me, Conan!" the voice came more distinctly.

Conan moved out of the shadows, scowling. "What the devil are you doing here?—*Crom!*"

He half crouched, the flesh prickling along his spine. It was not Balthus who was emerging from the other side of the glade. A weird glow burned through the trees. It moved toward him, shimmering weirdly—a green witch-fire that moved with purpose and intent.

It halted some feet away and Conan glared at it, trying to distinguish its fire-misted outlines. The quivering flame had a solid core; the flame was but a green garment that masked some animate and evil entity; but the Cimmerian was unable to make out its shape or likeness. Then, shockingly, a voice spoke to him from amidst the fiery column.

"Why do you stand like a sheep waiting for the butcher, Conan?"

The voice was human but carried strange vibrations that were not human.

"Sheep?" Conan's wrath got the best of his momentary awe. "Do you think I'm afraid of a damned Pictish swamp devil? A friend called me."

"I called in his voice," answered the other. "The men you follow belong to my brother; I would not rob his knife of their blood. But you are mine. Oh, fool, you have come from the far gray hills of Cimmeria to meet your doom in the forests of Conajohara."

"You've had your chance at me before now," snorted Conan. "Why didn't you kill me then, if you could?"

"My brother had not painted a skull black for you and hurled it into the fire that burns for ever on Gullah's black altar. He had not whispered your name to the black ghosts that haunt the uplands of the Dark Land. But a bat has flown over the Mountains of the Dead and drawn your image in blood on the white tiger's hide that hangs before the long hut where sleep the Four Brothers of the Night. The great serpents coil about their feet and the stars burn like fire-flies in their hair."

"Why have the gods of darkness doomed me to death?" growled Conan.

Something—a hand, foot or talon, he could not tell which, thrust out from the fire and marked swiftly on the mold. A symbol blazed there, marked with fire, and faded, but not before he recognized it.

"You dared make the sign which only a priest of Jhebbal Sag dare make. Thunder rumbled through the black Mountain of the Dead and the altar-hut of Gullah was thrown down by a wind from the Gulf of Ghosts. The loon which is messenger to the Four Brothers of the Night flew swiftly and whispered your name in my ear. Your race is run. You are a

dead man already. Your head will hang in the altar-hut of my brother. Your body will be eaten by the black-winged, sharp-beaked Children of Jhil."

"Who the devil is your brother?" demanded Conan. His sword was naked in his hand, and he was subtly loosening the ax in his belt.

"Zogar Sag; a child of Jhebbal Sag who still visits his sacred groves at times. A woman of Gwawela slept in a grove holy to Jhebbal Sag. Her babe was Zogar Sag. I too am a son of Jhebbal Sag, out of a fire-being from a far realm. Zogar Sag summoned me out of the Misty Lands. With incantations and sorcery and his own blood he materialized me in the flesh of his own planet. We are one, tied together by invisible threads. His thoughts are my thoughts; if he is struck, I am bruised. If I am cut, he bleeds. But I have talked enough. Soon your ghost will talk with the ghosts of the Dark Land, and they will tell you of the old gods which are not dead, but sleep in the outer abysses, and from time to time awake."

"I'd like to see what you look like," muttered Conan, working his ax free, "you who leave a track like a bird, who burn like a flame and yet speak with a human voice."

"You shall see," answered the voice from the flame, "see, and carry the knowledge with you into the Dark Land."

The flames leaped and sank, dwindling and dimming. A face began to take shadowy form. At first Conan thought it was Zogar Sag himself who stood wrapped in green fire. But the face was higher than his own, and there was a demoniac aspect about it—Conan had noted various abnormalities about Zogar Sag's features—an obliqueness of the eyes, a sharpness of the ears, a wolfish thinness of the lips: these peculiarities were exaggerated in the apparition which swayed before him. The eyes were red as coals of living fire.

More details came into view: a slender torso, covered with snaky scales, which was yet man-like in shape, with man-like arms, from the waist upward; below, long crane-like legs ended in splay, three-toed feet like those of some huge bird. Along the monstrous limbs the blue fire fluttered and ran. He saw it as through a glistening mist.

Then suddenly it was towering over him, though he had not seen it move toward him. A long arm, which for the first time he noticed was armed with curving, sickle-like talons, swung high and swept down at his neck. With a fierce cry he broke the spell and bounded aside, hurling his ax. The demon avoided the cast with an unbelievably quick movement of its narrow head and was on him again with a hissing rush of leaping flames.

But fear had fought for it when it slew its other victims, and Conan was not afraid. He knew that any being clothed in material flesh can be slain by material weapons, however grisly its form may be.

One flailing talon-armed limb knocked his helmet from his head. A little lower and it would have decapitated him. But fierce joy surged through him as his savagely driven sword sank deep in the monster's groin. He bounded backward from a flailing stroke, tearing his sword free as he leaped. The talons raked his breast, ripping through mail-links as if they had been cloth. But his return spring was like that of a starving wolf. He was inside the lashing arms and driving his sword deep in the monster's belly —felt the arms lock about him and the talons ripping the mail from his back as they sought his vitals—he was lapped and

dazzled by blue flame that was chill as ice—then he had torn fiercely away from the weakening arms and his sword cut the air in a tremendous swipe.

The demon staggered and fell sprawling sidewise, its head hanging only by a shred of flesh. The fires that veiled it leaped fiercely upward, now red as gushing blood, hiding the figure from view. A scent of burning flesh filled Conan's nostrils. Shaking the blood and sweat from his eyes, he wheeled and ran staggering through the woods. Blood trickled down his limbs. Somewhere, miles to the south, he saw the faint glow of flames that might mark a burning cabin. Behind him, toward the road, rose a distant howling that spurred him to greater efforts.

8. *Conajohara No More*

THERE had been fighting on Thunder River; fierce fighting before the walls of Velitrium; ax and torch had been plied up and down the bank, and many a settler's cabin lay in ashes before the painted horde was rolled back.

A strange quiet followed the storm, in which people gathered and talked in hushed voices, and men with red-stained bandages drank their ale silently in the taverns along the river bank.

There, to Conan the Cimmerian, moodily quaffing from a great wine-glass, came a gaunt forester with a bandage about his head and his arm in a sling. He was the one survivor of Fort Tuscelan.

"You went with the soldiers to the ruins of the fort?"

Conan nodded.

"I wasn't able," murmured the other. "There was no fighting?"

"The Picts had fallen back across Black River. Something must have broken their nerve, though only the devil who made them knows what."

The woodsman glanced at his bandaged arm and sighed.

"They say there were no bodies worth disposing of."

Conan shook his head. "Ashes. The Picts had piled them in the fort and set fire to the fort before they crossed the river. Their own dead and the men of Valannus."

"Valannus was killed among the last —in the hand-to-hand fighting when they broke the barriers. They tried to take him alive, but he made them kill him. They took ten of the rest of us prisoners when we were so weak from fighting we could fight no more. They butchered nine of us then and there. It was when Zogar Sag died that I got my chance to break free and run for it."

"Zogar Sag's dead?" ejaculated Conan.

"Aye. I saw him die. That's why the Picts didn't press the fight against Velitrium as fiercely as they did against the fort. It was strange. He took no wounds in battle. He was dancing among the slain, waving an ax with which he'd just brained the last of my comrades. He came at me, howling like a wolf—and then he staggered and dropped the ax, and began to reel in a circle screaming as I never heard a man or beast scream before. He fell between me and the fire they'd built to roast me, gagging and frothing at the mouth, and all at once he went rigid and the Picts shouted that he was dead. It was during the confusion that I slipped my cords and ran for the woods.

"I saw him lying in the firelight. No weapon had touched him. Yet there were red marks like the wounds of a sword in the groin, belly and neck—the last as if his head had been almost severed from his body. What do you make of that?"

Conan made no reply, and the forester, aware of the reticence of barbarians on

certain matters, continued: "He lived by magic, and somehow, he died by magic. It was the mystery of his death that took the heart out of the Picts. Not a man who saw it was in the fighting before Velitrium. They hurried back across Black River. Those that struck Thunder River were warriors who had come on before Zogar Sag died. They were not enough to take the city by themselves.

"I came along the road, behind their main force, and I know none followed me from the fort. I sneaked through their lines and got into the town. You brought the settlers through all right, but their women and children got into Velitrium just ahead of those painted devils. If the youth Balthus and old Slasher hadn't held them up awhile, they'd have butchered every woman and child in Conajohara. I passed the place where Balthus and the dog made their last stand. They were lying amid a heap of dead Picts—I counted seven, brained by his ax, or disemboweled by the dog's fangs, and there were others in the road with arrows sticking in them. Gods, what a fight that must have been!"

"He was a man," said Conan. "I drink to his shade, and to the shade of the dog, who knew no fear." He quaffed part of the wine, then emptied the rest upon the floor, with a curious heathen gesture, and smashed the goblet. "The heads of ten Picts shall pay for his, and seven heads for the dog, who was a better warrior than many a man."

And the forester, staring into the moody, smoldering blue eyes, knew the barbaric oath would be kept.

"They'll not rebuild the fort?"

"No; Conajohara is lost to Aquilonia. The frontier has been pushed back. Thunder River will be the new border."

The woodsman sighed and stared at his calloused hand, worn from contact with ax-haft and sword-hilt. Conan reached his long arm for the wine-jug. The forester stared at him, comparing him with the men about them, the men who had died along the lost river, comparing him with those other wild men over that river. Conan did not seem aware of his gaze.

"Barbarism is the natural state of mankind," the borderer said, still staring somberly at the Cimmerian. "Civilization is unnatural. It is a whim of circumstance. And barbarism must always ultimately triumph."

[THE END]

The Suicide in the Study

By ROBERT BLOCH

A short story of dual personality

TO SEE him sitting there in the dim-lit darkness of the study, one would never have suspected him for what he was. Wizards nowadays are not garbed in cabalistic robes of silver and black; instead they wear purple dressing-gowns. It is not required of them that their eyebrows meet, their nails grow long as talons, and their eyes flame like emerald-imprisoned dreams. Nor are they necessarily bent and furtive, and old. This one was not; he was young and slim, almost imperially straightforward.

He sat beneath the lamplight in the great oak-paneled room; a dark, handsome man of perhaps thirty-five years of age. There was little of cruelty or malice visible in his keen, clean-featured face, and little of madness in his eyes; yet he was a wizard, just as surely as if he lurked over human sacrifices in the skull-strewn darkness of forbidden tombs.

It was only necessary for one to survey the walls of his study for corroboration. Only a wizard would possess those moldering, maggoty volumes of monstrous and fantastic lore; only a thaumaturgical adept would dare the darker mysteries of the *Necronomicon,* Ludvig Prinn's *Mysteries of the Worm,* the *Black Rites* of mad Luveh-Keraph, priest of Bast, or Comte d'Erlette's ghastly *Cultes des Goules.* No one save a sorcerer would have access to the ancient manuscripts bound in Ethiopian skin, or burn such rich and aphrodisiac incense in an enshrined skull. Who else would fill the mercifully cloaking darkness of the room with curious relics, mortuary souvenirs from ravished graves, or worm-demolished scrolls of primal dread?

Superficially, it was a normal room that night, and its occupant a normal man. But for proof of its inherent strangeness it was not necessary to glance at the skull, the book-cases, or the grim, shadow-shrouded remains, to know its occupant for what he was. For James Allington wrote in his secret diary tonight, and his musings were far from sanity.

"TONIGHT I am ready to make the test. I am convinced at last that splitting of the identity can be accomplished by means of therapeutic hypnotism, provided that the mental attitude conducive to such a partition can be induced.

"Fascinating subject, that. Dual identity—the dream of men from the beginning of time! Two souls in one body . . . all philosophy is based on comparative logic; good and evil. Why, then, can not such a division exist in the human soul? Stevenson was only partly right when he wrote *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.* He imagined a chemical metamorphosis varying from one extreme to the other. I believe that both identities are *co-existent;* that, once they are separated by auto-hypnotic thought, a man can enjoy two existences simultaneously—his good self and his bad.

"They laughed at my theory in the club. Foster—that pompous old fool!—

called me a dreamer. Dreamer? What does he, a petty scientific chemist, know of the basic mysteries of Life and Death? A glimpse into my laboratory would shock his smug soul into insanity. The others, too; mob-catering writers, pedantic fossils who call themselves professors, prim biologists who are shocked at the mention of my experiments in synthetic creation of life—what do such as these understand? They would shudder at the *Necronomicon;* burn it, too, if they could; burn it as their pious ancestors did three hundred years ago. Witch-baiters, skeptics, materialists all! I'm sick of the whole silly pack of them. It is the fate of the genius to dwell alone. Very well, then, I'll dwell alone—but soon they will come cringing to my door and beg for mercy!

"If my work tonight only succeeds! If I can succeed in hypnotizing myself into dual personality, physically manifested! Even modern psychology claims it can be done. Spiritualism credits its possibilities. The ancients have furnished me the key to the problem, as they have done before. . . . Alhazred knew many things—it was only the weight of the knowledge that drove him mad.

"Two bodies! Once I can achieve that state at will, I shall hold the key to powers for ever denied to men. Immortality, perhaps; it is only a step further. After that there will be no need of skulking here in secret; no necessity of passing my researches off as a harmless hobby. Dreamer, eh? I'll show them!

"I wonder what the *other* shape will look like? Will it be human? It must, otherwise—but I had better not think of that. It is quite probable that it will be an ugly-looking customer. I do not flatter myself. I know that the evil side of my nature, while concealed, is undoubtedly dominant. There is danger, though—evil is an uncontrollable force in its purest form. It will draw strength from my body, too—energy to manifest itself physically. But that must not deter me. I must make the test. If it succeeds I shall have power—power undreamt of—power to kill, to rend, to destroy! I shall add to my little collection here, and settle a few old scores with my skeptical friends. After that there will be other pleasant things to do.

"But enough of such musings. I must begin. I shall lock the study doors; the servants have gone for the evening and there will be no one to intrude upon my privacy. I dare not risk using an electrically manipulated machine for fear of some untoward consequences in removing the hypnosis. I shall try to induce a hypnotic trance by concentrating intently on this heavy, polished paper-knife here on my desk. Meanwhile, I shall focus my will on the matter at hand, using the Soul Chant of Sebek as a focal point.

"I shall set the alarm for twelve o'clock, exactly one hour from now. Its ringing will break the spell. That, I believe, is all I need bother to do. As an added precaution, I shall burn this record. Should anything go wrong, I would hate to have all my little plans disclosed to the world.

"Nothing shall go wrong, however. I have used auto-hypnosis many times before, and I will be very careful. It will be a marvelous feeling to control two bodies at once. I can hardly control myself—I find my body trembling in eagerness and anticipation of its forthcoming metamorphosis. Power!

"Very well. After this report is reduced to ashes I shall be ready—ready to undertake the greatest experiment man has ever known."

2

JAMES ALLINGTON sat before the shaded lamp. Before him on the table lay the paper-knife, its polished blade shim-

mering. Only the slow ticking of a clock broke the sable silence of the locked room.

The wizard's eyes were glassy; they shone in the light, immobile as a basilisk's. The reflection from the surface of the knife stabbed through his retina like the fiery ray of a burning sun, but his betranced gaze never wavered.

Who knows what strange inversion was occurring in the dreamer's bewitched brain; what subtle transmutation generated from his purpose? He had fallen into his sleep with the fixed resolve of severing his soul, dividing his personality, bisecting his ego. Who knows? Hypnotism does many strange things.

What secret Powers did he invoke to aid him in his fight? What black genesis of unholy life lurked within the shadows of his inner consciousness; what demons of leering evil granted him his dark desires?

For granted they were. Suddenly he awoke, and he could feel that he was no longer alone in that nighted room. He felt the presence of another, there in the darkness on the other side of the table.

Or was it another? Was it not he, himself? He glanced down at his body, and was unable to suppress a gasp of astonishment. *He seemed to have shrunk to less than a quarter of his ordinary size!* His body was light, fragile, dwarfed. For a moment he was incapable of thought or movement. His eyes strayed to the corner of the room, trying vainly to see the gloom-obscured movements of a presence that shambled there.

Then things happened. Out of the darkness nightmare came; stark, staring nightmare—a monstrous, hairy figure; huge, grotesque, simian—a hideous travesty of all things human. It was black madness; slavering, mocking madness with little red eyes of wisdom old and evil; leering snout and yellow fangs of grimacing death. It was like a rotting, living skull upon the body of a black ape. It was grisly and wicked, troglodytic and wise.

A monstrous thought assailed Allington. Was *this* his other self—this ghoul-spawned, charnel horror of corpse-accursed dread?

Too late the wizard realized what had befallen him. His experiment *had* succeeded, but terribly so. He had not realized how far the evil in his nature had outbalanced the good. This monster—this grisly abomination of darkness—was stronger than he was, and, being solely evil, *it was not mentally controlled by his other self.* Allington viewed it now with new fear in his eyes. It was like a creature from the Pit. All that was foul and obscene and anti-human in his make-up lay behind that grinning parody of a countenance. The beast-like body hinted of shadows that creep beneath the grave or lurk entombed within the deepest recesses of normal minds. Yet in it Allington recognized a mad, atavistic caricature of himself—all the lust, the greed, the insane ambition, the cruelty, the ignorance; the fiend-spawned secrets of his soul within the body of a gigantic ape!

As if in answer to his recognition, the creature laughed, and tentacles of terror gripped the wizard's heart.

The thing was coming toward him—it meant to destroy him, as evil always does. Allington, his tiny body ludicrously struggling to move quickly while impeded by clothes now ridiculously large for his diminutive frame, raced from his chair and flattened himself against the wall of the study. His voice, curiously treble, shrieked frantic supplication and futile commands to the approaching nemesis.

His prayers and curses turned to the hoarse gibberings of madness as the huge beast lunged across the table. His experiment was succeeding with a vengeance . . . *vengeance!* His glaring eyes watched, fascinated, as one great paw grasped the paper-knife, and fearsome laughter riddled the night. It was laughing . . . laughing! Somewhere an alarm-clock rang, but the wizard could not hear. . . .

THEY found James Allington lying dead upon his study floor. There was a paper-knife imbedded in his breast, and they called it suicide, for no one could possibly have entered that locked and windowless room.

But that did not explain the fingerprints on the handle of the knife—the terrible fingerprints—*like those left by the hand of a gigantic ape.*

The Woman in Gray

By WALKER G. EVERETT

A strange story of too many cocktails, and a weird nemesis in gray

BILL was at a dinner party at the Carters when the subject first came up—a dinner to which he would never have gone if he could have thought of a single plausible excuse. Sarah Carter had a girl visiting her from the East; her school roommate or something, Bill thought vaguely. Bill was her dinner partner. They were talking about some people she didn't like.

"And they told it all over town," she said, "that I was the girl that was caught in the roadhouse, and that I had a red wig on so nobody would know me. Oh, how I wish I could get even with them—the most hateful people! Haven't you any suggestions?"

Bill looked pensive. Many Martinis had set up a pleasant buzzing in his brain, and everything in life seemed very easy.

"You might tell everybody they have a crazy locked-up daughter nobody ever sees, and that's why they don't like young girls."

"Too easy. They have *three* daughters, all crazy, only not locked up. That is, yet."

"In that case, I don't know," said Bill. "Why don't you just leave it to me?"

She looked at him. "What do you mean? Do you make little wax images and stick pins in them?"

Ah! there she had stolen a march on him—because that was just what he had been going to say. So he took a piece of celery, applied his mental spurs to himself and came out in an inspiration.

"Haven't I ever told you about the lady in gray?"

"No! Who is she?"

"Just a lady in gray."

"Well, where is she?"

"She's right here beside me now!"

"Where?"—startled.

"Oh," said Bill, confidentially, getting

into his stride, "you can't see her. I'm the only one that can see her, but she's right here by me all the time. I've known her for years."

"Goodness gracious!" exclaimed his partner. "Aren't you scared? Doesn't she haunt you?"

"Oh, no. She *likes* me. That's why she stays here.—Isn't it, Lady?" He turned and nodded to the imaginary figure beside him. "Of course, she's very modest, and goes out of the room when I'm undressed, but all the rest of the time she's here. Even her face is gray."

"Well," said the girl, making a violent effort to keep the conversation going, "doesn't she do anything at all?"

"Certainly. She gets after people I don't like."

"How terrible! Well, sic her on the Quarrys in Hartford, then. Tell her to do her worst."

"I will, right now.—Did you hear that, Lady? Hartford, Connecticut; Quarry's the name."

"The third house from the corner on the left," said the girl. "I don't want any mistake."

"She never makes a mistake," said Bill; "and now, I think dinner's over and we can get down to the serious part of the evening."

And that was the last Bill thought about it for two weeks, until Sarah Carter plowed across the room at a cocktail party, and said, "What's this about some Lady in Gray?"

"I don't know," said Bill. "What do you mean?"

"I had a letter from Elsa. She said to tell you your Lady in Gray did the work a little too well, and that you'd better be careful."

Bill looked thoughtful. "What else did she say?"

"Something about a family named Quarry. That had an automobile accident, and all died—five, I think."

"What a coincidence!" said Bill. "And what a story!"

He lost no time in telling it around, of course. It was a good story, with enough of pleasant actual horror in it, but not too much, the Quarrys remaining mythical; so that it was worth a chill and a laugh any place.

Two weeks later he was at a dinner at Corinne Gorman's house—a fine, old-fashioned dinner with old-fashioned cocktails before, new-fashioned highballs after, and good old-fashioned screaming all the way through. Bill sat by Corinne; her short boyish hair was circled with a gold band, and she had on a red velvet dress. She turned to him and pointed to two empty seats.

"I could kill those people," said Corinne. "They're always hours late anyway, and finally they phone from Winnetka that they've broken down." She tamped out a nice long two and one-half inch cigarette butt until it was twisted and grub-like. "Why don't you sic your Lady in Gray on them for me?"

"I would, but I don't hate them. *I* don't want them to turn over like the Quarrys," Bill answered.

"How well do you know them?" asked Corinne.

"Not very well."

"Well, I can tell you some things. They've named their children 'Peggy Jean' and 'Michael Peter'; they have some name for their car; they go to the circus every year, and laugh and laugh and eat crackerjack and peanuts—that's the kind of people they are."

"Oh, well," said Bill, "I'd just as soon hate them myself. Sure, I'll send the Gray Lady after them—only they'd better look out."

That was the last they thought about

it until dinner was nearly over, and Corinne was called to the telephone. She came back white.

"It was they," she whispered. "Terrible accident; a taxi hit them. Don't tell anybody for a minute."

"Were they badly hurt?" Bill asked.

"Yes."

He wondered suddenly if he ought to say anything about the absurd conversation regarding the Gray Lady. He decided not. Two coincidences were just a little too much. He knew there was nothing in it—hadn't he made her up out of a clear sky, just to amuse a guest of Sarah Carter? But, just the same, he felt it would be a little smart-alecky to allude to it. However, Corinne soon saved him the trouble.

"Never mention that Gray Woman again," she said. "Never, never, never, never."

"Oh, that didn't have anything at all to do with it," said Bill. "You know that."

"Well, I do. But it's a little too strange, that's all—as if Santa Claus should suddenly come down the chimney."

"Or you'd find a baby in a cabbage."

"I think that would be a great improvement," said Corinne. "But this isn't any time to be funny. I'll tell them now, and start the shrieks."

So Bill's Lady in Gray story became even more famous. "It's the funniest thing," people said; "somebody ought to send it in to the *New Yorker*. And you know, Bill is such a scream about it—he's afraid to hate anybody, he says, for fear she'll get after them—and he's going to rent her to the Government in the next war."

But Bill didn't think he was funny. He thought this, while not exactly playing with fire, was at least in bad taste. He didn't think he was in very good taste, anyway, for about this time he had a bad week; seven nights of drinking and running around town, cashing checks, all the time with a low wormish feeling of approaching reckoning under the talking, talking, talking of nightly parties to get over yesterday's hangover. And every day down at the office getting blearier, going to the water-cooler with the aspirin bottle in his hand and standing blindly in the window when the terrible eleven-thirty nausea swept over him in waves. But he didn't know what to do, because life didn't have much meaning, anyway, and he was having a better time than most people.

One warm night—it was the next Monday—he sat in his room, alone. The window was open, on blackness, soft and flecked with gold. The curtains were limp; his electric fan turned its flat face wearily from side to side, stirring up an ineffectual commotion in the air. A bell rang; he answered.

"Mr. Jacobson to see you."

"Tell him to come up."

What could he want, Jacobson from the office, whom he hardly knew, unctuous and self-righteous?

The door-bell buzzed.

"Come in. Good evening, good evening."

Jacobson came in and sat down. "Warm, isn't it?"

"Terribly."

"You probably wonder why I am here." Jacobson's mouse-like eyes took in the empty highball glass; the bowl of melted ice.

"Well," said Bill, "I do. Want a drink?"

"Thanks, no. Never touch it."

"Oh. O.K."

"What I wanted to see you about is this—Mr. Selfridge asked me to have a

little talk with you—a friendly chat, merely, between friends," he purred.

Bill looked at him. "What a smack!" he thought. "Yes?"

"It's about your work—a word to the wise, as it were."

"Oh. Have I been lying down on the job? Am I going to get the gate?"

"Oh, no, not that. But the first, perhaps, a trifle. A little too many parties—eh? And Mr. Selfridge thought that just a quiet tip from a friend——"

Bill was reminded of the smile of a snake. "I see," he said. "Thank you."

"Oh, not at all—not at all. It's a pleasure."

"I don't doubt it."

"Oh, I didn't mean that! Well, I'll be running along." Jacobson got up. "Nice little place you've got here."

"Yes," said Bill. "I like it." (How he hated the man! Why didn't he go?)

"Well, I'd better go. I've got a new Chevy downstairs, and I have to go so slow it'll take me a while. I live in the suburbs, you know."

"Oh, you do? You have? How do you like it?"

"It's a fine little bus. You can see it from the window."

"I'll look out. Good-night. See you tomorrow."

"Good-night." And Jacobson was gone.

"That ass and his Chevy," thought Bill. "I wish——"

He went to the window, looked out. Presently Jacobson came out, climbed into a little yellow car with a black patch on the top, started out, and drove straight into the side of a big truck that had swung around the corner, with a horrible ripping and glassy noise.

"Good God!" said Bill.

He waited until he saw people, like sudden ants, flocking; then he came back, mixed himself a highball, and sat down on the couch. It had happened again. And just after being told all that about his job. Everything he did seemed to be wrong. And it was all his own fault. He gulped down his drink and made another, stronger. The light seemed so bright, and made the room look so empty, with only those two black holes of windows, that he turned them out, and sat in the single ray that came from the bathroom.

When the lights were out, the room changed; the black windows became, gradually, a soft warm blue, like a promise of day to come. It was the room that was dark. But Bill just sat there, tapping his foot to some radio music that drifted in. Then he spoke out loud, "God! I hate myself!"

Then the door opened, and in came the Lady in Gray. Now, it wasn't anyone dressed up to frighten him, or his sister come to call. It was the Lady in Gray, and Bill knew it. He looked at her steadily as she came nearer, quietly, delicately. He felt his brains run down the inside of his skull like melting drug-store ice; the room started to rock, and then to swirl faster and faster. Finally she was halfway across the floor. He threw his glass at her. It smashed against the opposite wall.

Bill stood up and whirled around—the whole room was swinging in a grayish haze. He turned to the window.

They found him next morning, on the second-floor fire escape—one of those horizontal ones, with a weight on the end. He had landed almost in the middle, and was doing a ghastly little teeter-totter.

Together

By IDA M. KIER

A brief little story with a real human appeal

DIMLY lighted windows were all that was visible of the old house behind the maples. The autumn night wind, whistling a dirge, stirred half-bare branches, and dead leaves dropped softly, like tears of sorrow, on the roof. Inside the dwelling the solemn stillness was broken occasionally by hushed voices and careful footfalls.

The clock was striking twelve when a woman crossed the narrow hallway, noiselessly opened a door, and paused on the threshold of what was evidently the best room. A shaded lamp illuminated the plainly furnished interior, its rays seeming to focus on the most striking object —a cream-colored casket, uncovered, and disclosing the white-shrouded form of a girl whose head, crowned with wavy, brown hair, lay serenely against the satin pillow. Close by, in an old-fashioned rocking-chair, a white-haired woman was sitting. There was no sound within the room; no motion save the gentle swaying of white curtains at an open window behind the bier.

The woman in the doorway coughed to announce her presence, then softly crossed the floor and stood beside the rocker.

"Come, Gran'ma Bowen," she coaxed, "it's after midnight, and you'll need strength for tomorrow. Do come——" She ceased and involuntarily shrank back as the aged face with its drawn, grief-stricken features and sorrowful eyes was raised to hers.

The old woman spoke in a decisive tone. "I've told you before that I won't leave this room."

"But you can do no good staying here, Gran'ma," was argued kindly, "and you need rest——"

"Rest!" bitterly. "As if I could rest away from Nelly! No! I won't leave her. I sat with her the first night she was on earth—and I'll stay by her the last. All my family gone," she began to moan pitifully, her body swaying back and forth, frail hands twisting each other. "Nelly the only one left, and now——" She choked back sobs, and after a moment added, "I could bear it better if—she looked right——"

"Looked right?" The listener turned startled eyes on the casket, and saw a lovely face, with no hint of death showing on the tranquil features. The mortician had skilfully applied life-like tints. Long lashes lay quiet on the delicately pinked cheeks; the curved lips were faintly carmined. "Why, she looks beautiful, Gran'ma."

"But not natural," the old lady declared. "Nelly's hair never laid smooth like that. It tumbled over her forehead. And her mouth wasn't sad. Go away!" harshly, pointing to the door. "Leave me alone with my dead."

THE woman retreated hastily to the room across the hall where another waited. "She won't come, Emmaline. She wants to be alone."

"Thought you could do nothing with her." Emmaline shook her head. "Last time I went in, she ordered me to keep out. Well, it's her house and we neighbors'll have to do as she says, I reckon.

Poor soul! She's not budged out of that room since Nelly was brought home. What you shaking for, Jennie?"

"Gran'ma Bowen looks awful. She's taking it too hard."

"It was a terrible shock," Emmaline returned solemnly. "That girl—full of life—going for a ride; and in a little while brought back a corpse! No wonder her grandmother's distracted."

"She—scared me!" Jennie shuddered again. "I'll be glad when this night is over. Will anyone else be here—do you suppose?"

"I guess not. But Lorene promised to come back in the morning. You see," continued Emmaline, "Lorene was Nelly's closest friend. The two were like sisters, and expected to *be* sisters, once; for Nelly was engaged to Lorene's brother, Tim McCree. He's an aviator. Lorene was heartbroken when Tim and Nelly quarreled and Tim went away. And she was furious when he wrote that he was engaged to a Brooklyn girl. Nelly laughed, they say! But, of course, she would. I've been wondering—seems kind of queer—about that accident. Maybe——"

"What?" eagerly.

"Oh—nothing." Then, after a pause, "Lorene sent her brother a wire. Wonder if he'll come?"

Jennie could not say; and silence fell. The minutes ticked away, and the watchers nodded in their chairs. Emmaline, rousing suddenly, exclaimed in dismay, "My goodness! It's after two! And listen at the wind—a reg'lar gale! Take a look in yonder, Jennie, while I make some strong coffee."

"You go, Emmaline. I'm—afraid."

"Good land!" Emmaline spoke in a hoarse whisper. "What you 'fraid of? Go on," she commanded. "Don't be silly!"

Jennie reluctantly crossed the hall and opened the best-room door. Mrs. Bowen still sat with fragile hands clasped against the side of the coffin, her white head bowed upon them. How still!

Jennie's heart jumped to her throat as the white curtains suddenly billowed inward and the leaves of a magazine on a standtable fluttered noisily. Only the wind, of course. That window must be closed. But as she started forward, her steps were arrested by the sound of the old woman's voice, in gentle, coaxing tones:

"Tell Gran about it, honey. Gran wants to know how it happened. And she wants to know what makes you look so sad—like you used to when you were a little girl and had been naughty—and then were sorry. If you've done something you're sorry about, honey—I want to know the truth. Then I'll be satisfied."

The voice ceased as the pallid face raised and turned toward a door that opened on the side lawn. A look of surprize came over the pinched features. An exclamation fell from the parted lips.

"Why, Tim! That door's locked—but you're coming right in!"

Her gaze traveled from the door to the casket, as if following a moving form.

"I'm glad you've come, Tim," the quavering voice went on. "I suppose you got the telegram. Your sister hoped it would give you an awful jar. She was mad at you. I wasn't mad; just sorry for you and Nelly both. To think you would quarrel—after you'd been sweethearts so long! There, now—don't muss her hair all up, Tim! Better put your own hair out of your eyes. It's all ever' way. Nelly always said you had beautiful hair, but I never noticed it being so red before. And your face is red, too! It looks like—— What happened?"

Her voice trailed into silence; her dim eyes watched avidly.

"I wanted to be all alone in here," she

continued. "I ordered the women to keep out. But I don't mind you, Tim, because you and Nelly used to think so much of each other. I know that quarrel hurt her, but she wouldn't let on. She laughed and said she didn't care if you married another girl. Only her eyes didn't laugh. And they looked so sad when she started on the drive. They say the car shot right over the cliff! Strange—wasn't it?—when Nelly was such a good driver and knew the road so well. I don't understand—*you* do, you say? When you got the telegram, you knew what Nelly had done? And you couldn't stand it? You wanted to go with her? So you went up—— There, Tim, you're rumpling her hair again! The undertaker will be mad. He thought he had it fixed so nice. But I like it better, now. Looks like it used to when you and Nelly were courting. And you've kissed the smile back to her mouth. She looks happy now.—Nelly, honey! Tim's come! And Gran's come! Why, look—we're all—together——"

Another gust of wind sent the flapping magazine to the floor, and the curtains flared inward until their hems brushed the casket.

JENNIE forced her trembling limbs across the room. She lowered the sash quickly and turned; her eyes darted here and there, as if searching for someone. But there was only the old woman sitting motionless, forehead bowed on clasped hands; and the still figure in the coffin. Upon it Jennie gazed, fascinated. Finally she touched Mrs. Bowen's shoulder, then gave a cry.

Emmaline came running.

"Gran'ma's gone!" she whispered, after a glance. "Poor old soul! She just couldn't stand it—Jennie, what on earth are you saying?"

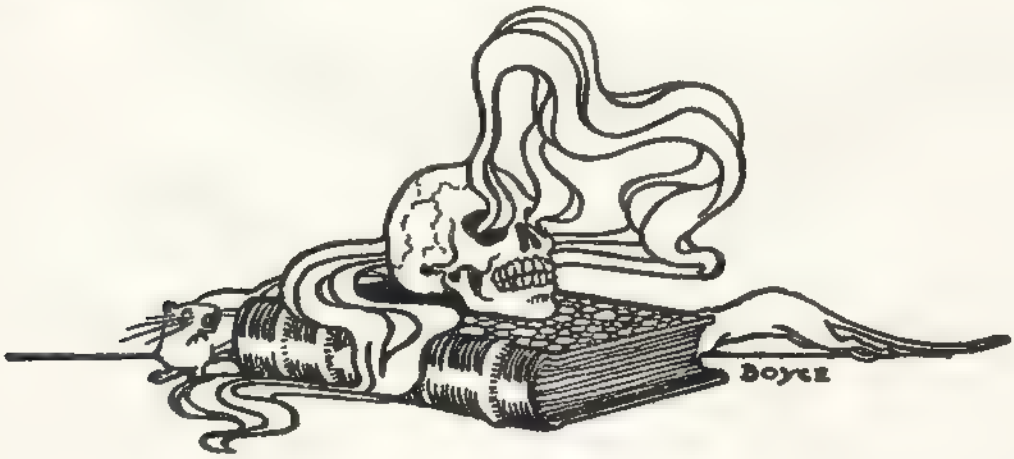
Jennie, shuddering and sobbing, talked on.

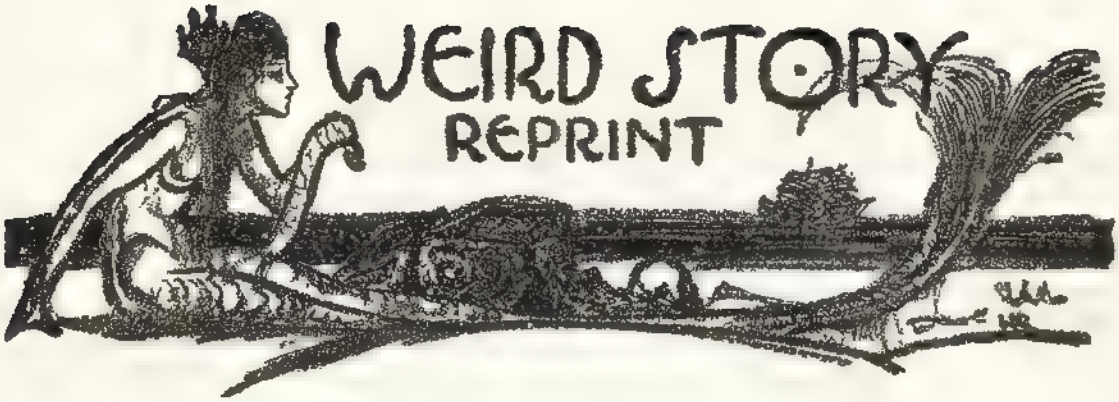
"Don't tell that to anyone else," Emmaline advised, when the tale was finished. "They'd think you're crazy. You mast've dreamt it."

"I didn't," Jennie declared vehemently. "I saw and heard, I tell you. Look," pointing to the casket. "You can say the wind did that to her hair. But could the wind make her smile? And she wasn't smiling, before."

Emmaline shook her head. "Don't ask me. I'll be glad when it's morning and Lorene comes."

MORNING came, but not Lorene. She had been called to Brooklyn by a telegram bearing the message that her brother, Tim McCree, had been killed during the night in a plane crash.





The Cup of Blood*

By OTIS ADELBERT KLINE

IT WAS after the close of the World War that Anderson and I decided to tour Scotland afoot. As my purpose is not to chronicle the details of that trip *in toto*, but rather to relate the story of how it was brought to a most abrupt and fearful termination, I will state, as briefly as possible, the incidents which led to that fateful and eventful night at Bludmanton Castle.

After two weeks of pleasant tramping and camping, with every night spent under canvas, we were strolling through a quaint little village late one afternoon, hot, tired and thirsty, when Anderson's roving eye spotted a sign that gave promise of sundry and assorted liquid refreshments of a most inviting nature. Straight for that sign we sped at double-quick, eased our packs to the floor of the cool taproom, and were soon washing the dust from our parched throats.

My buddy is quick at scraping acquaintances, and it was not long before he had started a conversation with old Sandy Magruder, who sat at the table next to ours. He was not loth to join us in a mug or two of ale, at Anderson's invitation, and we found him exceedingly interesting.

I presume there is scarcely a village, town or hamlet anywhere in the world that has not some individual landmark or curiosity which its inhabitants will point out with pride to strangers. In San Antonio they ask, "Have you seen the Alamo?" In New Orleans, "Have you been through the French Market?" In Rome, "Have you visited the Catacombs?" And so it goes.

In this case it was a haunted castle. Bludmanton Castle, so Sandy assured us, was haunted by "gibberin' ghaists and shriekin' houlets, and mayhap the Auld Nick himsel'."

I was disposed to argue the possibility of there being any such creatures as gibbering ghosts, but Anderson kicked my shins sharply under the table and plied the old fellow with questions that brought out a remarkable legend concerning the ancient ruins.

It seems that, many years before, Bludmanton Castle had been the stronghold of Sir Malcolm Blud, Laird of Bludmanton, a cruel and inhuman monster who was despised and hated the countryside

* From WEIRD TALES for September, 1923.

over, both for his servile cringing to those above him and his heartless and tyrannical treatment of those about him who had the misfortune to be of humble birth.

Though they hated and reviled their heartless laird, the people of Bludmanton loved and respected his wife, the beautiful and gentle Lady Helen; for many were her acts of kindness to the poor and afflicted, and did she but hear of someone who had suffered through the tyranny of her husband, she would straightway make amends insofar as her slender purse would permit.

Lady Helen was the daughter of a northern laird, and at the time of her marriage, brought two of her old servants to live at Bludmanton Castle. These servants gossipped, as servants will, and it was not long until everyone in and about the castle was acquainted with the circumstances of her unhappy wedding.

It was said that this marriage to a man more than twice her age had not been of her own choosing, for she was only eighteen at the time and Sir Malcolm well past fifty, but was forced on her by her father when it had been offered him as the only alternative to foreclosure for a certain debt he owed the Laird of Bludmanton, and could not pay on account of reduced circumstances.

A loveless marriage is tragic at best, but when there is added to it the despair of a hopeless lost love, then it is indeed a calamity. It seems that this was the case with Lady Helen, for there were whispers of a young theological student who had won her affection some time before the wedding, and on whose account she had been sternly rebuked by her father; not that she ever showed it, either by word or action, for she was a true and faithful wife, ever submissive to the word of her laird and keen to please him in all things. Despite the secret sorrow that clutched at her heart she went about silently and uncomplainingly, gradually growing paler and frailer, until at the end of a year she was but a shadow of her former self.

It was about this time that the aged minister of the parish died, and a younger man who had but recently taken orders was sent to fill his place. As the Lady Helen was continually engaged in her ministrations to the suffering and needy, it was natural that she should often meet the younger minister in the homes of his parishioners, and while she did her best to alleviate their physical wants he supplied them with spiritual comfort.

It was but natural, too, that when through illness she grew unable to leave the castle on her errands of mercy, she should request the young minister to act as her agent in distributing charity. In this capacity he became a frequent caller at the castle, and as the laird was much away, the busy tongues of malicious gossip were soon wagging with hints of a clandestine romance which at length reached the ears of the master.

SIR MALCOLM flatly refused to believe these idle rumors at first; that is, until he learned that the young minister was one and the same with the theological student who had won her girlish love. This changed his views, and transformed him from a trusting though stern husband, to a crafty, unscrupulous fiend.

Thereafter, he spied continually on the doings of his wife, at the same time taking great care that she might not suspect she was being watched. But her conduct was above reproach at all times, and had it not been for a single unfortunate incident it is probable that he would have given over his spying, and perhaps taken no small amount of vengeance on her slanderers. But as luck would have it,

she was taken with a giddiness one day when the young minister was present and would have fallen to the floor in a faint had he not caught her.

The maid-servant, who was in the room at the time, was sent for restoratives, and it was during her absence that the suspicious laird appeared in the doorway. At sight of his young wife in the arms of his supposed rival, who did not note his presence, as his back was toward the door, he turned and strode to his room with clenched hands, and a look on his face that struck terror to the hearts of those servants who chanced to meet him.

He kept to his room all that night, and the next day sent the Lady Helen to visit her father, saying that he was going to repair and remodel the castle. When she had started on her journey to the north he rode away alone to be absent for more than a month. He returned with a gang of foreign workmen, and ordered everyone from the castle while the remodeling was in progress, so it was done with absolute secrecy.

When the work was finished he personally conducted the foreigners to Edinburgh and put them aboard ship with their passages paid back to their own land.

On his return, he sent for the Lady Helen and gave a great feast in honor of the reopening of the castle. Guests were bidden from far and near, and for the first time in many years, the tenants were given the freedom of the place. Sir Malcolm, his wife, and the young minister were all present at the banquet in the early part of the evening, nor was their later absence noted until nearly twelve o'clock, at which time the laird put in an appearance, looking pale and haggard.

The Lady Helen and the minister were seen no more that night, nor were they ever seen afterward. Gossip had it that the two had eloped, but there were whispered rumors among the servants that the jealous husband had made away with them in some secret recess of the castle. There was a lackey who swore that, on passing the master's room at eleven o'clock on the night of the banquet, he heard the scream of a woman in mortal terror. The maid who put the room in order the next day told of finding a great crimson blood-stain on the rug, and under one of the chairs a silver goblet on which blood had dried and caked.

That the laird had taken some terrible revenge on them seemed proved beyond any shadow of doubt, though there was none who dared denounce him openly, or even to question him in the matter.

On the noon following the night of the banquet the laird had a stroke that sent him into a wild delirium. The old doctor who attended him said he had not long to live, and his nephew and heir, Sir Eric Blud, was summoned. As Sir Eric was in Aberdeen at the time, three days elapsed before his arrival.

Of all the servants in the household, there was only one with the courage to sit up with the raving master at night. Old Steenie MacDonald had been long in the service of the lairds of Bludmanton, and he vowed that even the Old Nick himself should not turn him from his duty.

WHAT Steenie saw or heard in that accursed bedchamber, no man ever knew, but it was said that he came running from the room about eleven o'clock that night, struck dumb with terror, nor did he ever speak after that.

Servants who had occasion to pass through the hallway went by that door as fast as their legs would carry them, and told of hearing the sobbing and moaning of a woman, mingled with the cursing and raving of the laird, although every-

one knew he was alone in that great room.

When Sir Eric arrived he went straight to the master's room, without heed to the tales concerning it, saying he feared neither man nor devil, and that if a sick man could withstand the power within that room, an able-bodied man with sword and pistols should have nothing to worry over. It was near the hour of eleven when he stepped to the bedside, while a group of curious, fearful servants cowered just outside the door.

Upon his arrival, the laird ceased his cursing and raving and greeted him with a feeble handshake. Though he was gasping for breath, he managed to make himself audible, even to those who stood without the door.

"You come in the nick of time, nephew," he said, "for I have not overmuch of breath of life left in me, and there are a few things I must tell you. My entire estate, personal and real—land, moneys, everything—goes to you at my death. I have but one request to make of you, and that is regarding the disposition of my body. In the great storeroom at the end of the keep is a strong-box which you will open, and in which you will find a leaden casket. Seal my remains in that casket and place it, without service or ceremony, in the tomb which I have caused to be built beside the chapel tower."

Scarcely had he spoken these words when the chapel bell began solemnly to toll the hour of eleven, and the piercing shriek of a woman in dreadful anguish rent the air. At this instant the old laird fell back dead, and the young laird gripped his pistols and backed toward the door; for the cry had come from inside the room and it was plain to be seen there was no woman present.

There followed the muffled sounds of sobbing and moaning, and loud knocks and raps were heard on the ceiling, the walls, and the floor. The servants beat a hasty retreat, and Sir Eric was not slow to follow.

The next day he carried out the orders of the deceased, and, in doing so, met with a strange and unexpected adventure; for just as they were lowering the leaden casket into the tomb the lid fell shut with a loud bang and the frightened pall-bearers let go their straps, which were hooked to rings in the coffin.

The young laird ordered them to open the tomb and recover the straps, but when they raised the lid, both casket and straps had completely disappeared. They concluded it was the work of the devil himself, for the interior was of solid masonry without crack of a size to admit even a sword-point, and neither laird nor retainers would have more to do with Bludmanton Castle.

They left in a body that day, every living soul, and found temporary shelter in the homes of the tenants until the young laird completed his new stronghold, which he built nearer the village.

WE WERE on our fifth mug of ale when Sandy finished his story.

"And you say the castle has not been inhabited since?" asked Anderson.

"The place hasna housed ilka human being to this day," replied Sandy, "but mony's the tale of hunters and wayfarers wha, passing the castle at nicht, ha' heard fearsome sounds an' blood-curdling shrieks fit to raise the dead."

"I have a consuming curiosity to see that old ruin," said Anderson.

"Let's go out and look it over," I suggested.

Anderson set down his mug with a crash.

"I have it!" he exclaimed. "We'll go

out there and camp for the night! It will be a rare adventure. Think of the sport of camping next to a ruined castle full of spooks! Maybe we can catch sight of one, or perhaps hear it wail."

"My cart is outside," said Sandy, warmed by the ale he had consumed. "I'll take ye ower an' ye maun view the ruins before sundown, but heed the advice of auld Sandy Magruder an' pitch your tent elsewhere. For me, I wadna spend the nicht in the lee o' Bludmanton Castle for a' the siller in the banks of Edinburgh."

We shouldered our packs and followed the old fellow outside to where a lean, mangy horse stood, hitched to a dilapidated jaunting-cart. The vehicle creaked alarmingly as we clambered aboard, and away we went, rumbling and rattling along the dusty road.

We followed the road for perhaps four miles, then turned into a narrow lane which led through a dense, shady wood. As we bumped round a bend in the narrow lane an imposing structure came into view—imposing despite its crumbling towers and skeleton turrets, its broken machicolations, and its age-shattered merlons and crenelles. It was built partly on a sloping hillside and partly on the level floor of the valley, and our winding road took us directly past the postern gate, against which a rotting ladder stood, to a spot on the hillside directly opposite the drawbridge, whence bubbled a spring of clear, sparkling water.

"Ah weel," said Sandy, leaping from the cart with remarkable agility for his years, "as your General Pershing said at the tomb of Lafayette, 'We are here'."

"An ideal camping-spot," exclaimed Anderson, and simultaneously we leaped to the ground, asking Sandy to show us about the castle and point out the different places he had mentioned in his story, but he flatly refused.

"I wadna venture in that ill-faur'd, ghaistly place for a' the ground i' the parish, an' if sic purpose be in your minds, I rede you beware; for though ye maun ha' been braw sodgers an' fought the enemy to a standstill, bear in mind that man has enemies that canna be overcome wi' bullets an' bayonets."

"If you refer to His Satanic Majesty and his imps," said Anderson, smiling, "I, for one, am quite willing to take a chance, having fought with the Devil Dogs and alongside the Ladies from Hell."

"Yes, let Beelzebub come," I said, "and bring a few of his foul fiends with him. As for ghosts, I am curious to hear one shriek. Certainly there could be nothing more interesting than a creature without lungs or vocal cords that can shriek."

Sandy turned away sorrowfully. "Puir misguided lads, ye ken not that of which ye speak so lightly. I ha' nae doot ye'll be made to pay heavily for every word, and as I see you are na disposed to return wi' me, I must be gangin', for the nicht will soon fall."

Upon his firm refusal to accept any pay for his services, we thanked him heartily and bade him a cheery good-bye as he rumbled off down the winding lane.

I began to unroll the tent, but Anderson stayed my hand.

"Wait, Art," he said. "I have an idea."

I looked up inquiringly.

"There is no need of our putting up the tent tonight," he went on.

"So that's your idea, is it? You'll stretch your hat-band all out of shape with one of those ideas of yours, some day. For my part, I'm going to sleep

under canvas. I smell rain in the air and——"

Anderson looked slightly aggrieved.

"If you'll have the goodness to hear me out and not jump so all-fired hastily at conclusions, perhaps you will change your mind. Who said anything about sleeping in the open? I was about to suggest that we sleep under a roof."

"You mean in the castle?" There was a note of something—let us call it anxiety—in my voice, that betrayed an inner repugnance to the idea of which I had not been objectively aware.

"Of course, if you're afraid——"

"Who's afraid? You big stiff, I think you're scared yourself."

He laughed. "Here we are, daring each other like a couple of schoolboys. I know perfectly well there is nothing to fear in that old castle, and so do you. It may save us a good wetting. Have you noticed that heavy bank of clouds on the northern horizon? There's a big storm coming and we're sure to get soaked out here on the hillside, tent or no tent."

"Well, anyway, let's cook our bacon and eggs before we go in," I said. "I'm so hungry my stomach thinks I went off and left it."

"Oh, come on. We can do our cooking inside. There'll be plenty of fireplaces, and I don't think we will have any trouble finding fuel."

We picked up our bundles and walked gingerly over the shaky, sagging drawbridge. The deep moat was nearly empty of water, as the lower embankment had given way, but a tiny stream trickled far below us, fed by the hillside spring. We passed through the bailey and thence to the inner court, where the click of our boots on the worn flagstones rang weirdly back from the surrounding walls. My companion looked about him with the air of one to whom the exploring of feudal castles was an everyday experience and made for a tall, arched doorway at our right.

"The family quarters of the laird should be in this part of the building," he said.

DOGGED by the hollow echoes of the empty building, we crossed a corridor, passed through a huge room, evidently a banquet hall, entered a second corridor, and passed many doorways, into each of which Anderson peered. At length he entered one, larger and more pretentious than the rest, and I followed.

"I believe this is the master's bedroom," he said, easing his pack to the floor. "Faugh! How musty it smells, and there's dust and dirt everywhere! Let's spread the tent on the floor in front of the fireplace. That will give us a clean place to eat and sleep, at least."

In the fireplace there was a small quantity of partly burned fuel which we scraped together, and soon we had a fire crackling. Then it was agreed that I should prepare our evening meal while Anderson went out and scouted for more wood.

When I had the coffee cooking and the bacon simmering, I walked about examining the room in the flickering firelight, for the murky twilight was already merging into darkness, and the windows at either side of the fireplace, far from providing any light, appeared like dull gray patches set in the wall.

The most striking object in the room was the great, canopied bed, in which, if the tale were true, the Laird of Bludmanton had slept his last sleep. It was apparent that the hangings were of rich material, even through the thick layer of dust that covered them. They were caught back at one side, and the disarrayed bedding confirmed Sandy's de-

scription of the hasty exit of Sir Eric and his retainers. The other pieces of furniture were three chairs, a beautifully carved table, and two massive chests. As to the room itself, it had a beamed ceiling, paneled walls hung at intervals with faded tapestry, and a rough plank floor that creaked dismally when trod upon, covered with a filthy, moth-eaten carpet.

I returned to the fireplace, set out our tin plates, cups and eating-utensils, broke the eggs into the hot bacon-grease, and went out to call Anderson. I hallooed loudly in the hallway—and was answered by my own echo.

"What can be keeping him?" I wondered.

He should have returned within ten minutes, at least, for it was but a short walk to the courtyard where there was wood a-plenty, and he had been gone fully twenty-five minutes. I made my way down the dark hallway, crossed the banquet room, and, after threading the outer corridor, stepped through the arched doorway into the courtyard. Anderson was not in sight.

"Jack!" I called loudly, "oh, Jack!"

A startled owl flew noisily from a niche behind me as I listened in vain for an answering cry. I knew that if Anderson were within hearing he would reply, so I was sorely puzzled and not a little alarmed. He was of an inquisitive nature, and there was no telling what might have happened to him. I crossed to the postern gate, fully expecting to see him lying at the bottom of the moat, but my pocket flashlight revealed only the weed-grown banks, the mossy walls and the shimmering, gurgling streamlet at the bottom.

It seemed that there was nothing for it but to explore the castle from top to bottom, and I set about the task with a gloomy foreboding of danger which I found impossible to shake off.

After looking into every room and corridor on the courtyard level, I mounted the treacherous steps of a rickety turret and began a systematic search of the towers and battlements, flashing my light into all dark corners and over the steep walls at points where I thought it possible my impetuous friend might have fallen.

As I stood on the topmost battlement of the great tower, the thunderstorm, which had been muttering ominously for some time, struck with considerable violence. Sheet after sheet of rain swept over me, drenching me to the skin. Forked lightning played about the tower and turret, and the floor trembled under my feet at each terrific crash of thunder.

I leaped to the temporary shelter of the black tower room and, while the storm raged furiously without, attempted to dispel the threatening inner clouds of foreboding regarding the fate of my friend, by shedding the light of reason on them. I had examined every foot of floor space in the castle, or near it, without trace of my lost companion.

Assuredly he had not run off and left me. What, then, had become of him? I could think of but two possible solutions: either he had gone back to our rendezvous and, finding it untenanted, was at present searching for me, or somebody or *something* had made away with him.

As the latter proposition seemed preposterous, the logical thing for me to do was to return to the master's bedchamber and wait for him.

I CLAMBERED down the wind-shaken turret, fought my way through the swirling torrents of rain in the court, and with the aid of my flashlight, reached the room without further incident. Anderson was not there, nor was there any sign that he had been there. The bacon and eggs were burned to a crisp, the coffee-

pot had boiled dry, and the fire was reduced to a heap of dull, red embers.

Placing the blackened cooking-utensils on the hearth, I piled the remainder of my scanty stock of fuel on the glowing coals, fanned them to a flame, and stood close to dry my damp clothing. All thought of hunger had left me, my mind being completely occupied with the mysterious disappearance of my chum and the disquieting situation in which I found myself: alone in a great, dark, musty mediæval castle, untenanted save by owls and vermin, and popularly supposed to be the abode of shrieking, gibbering ghosts.

I was not exactly afraid—not at that juncture, anyhow—but I must admit a feeling somewhat akin to fear crept over me as I mentally reviewed the story of Sandy Magruder and subconsciously connected it with Anderson's unknown fate.

I say "subconsciously" because, objectively, I would not admit to myself that there was such a thing as a ghost. I reasoned further, that even if there were such a thing—a dematerialized being, whose body consisted of nothing more ponderable than light, or perhaps vapor—it would be manifestly impossible for it either to make a noise or move physical objects. As to such a being flying off with my companion—absurd!

The fury of the storm gradually abated until it had settled down to a steady, pattering rain, with only occasional thunderclaps. This continued for perhaps an hour, then ceased entirely, and the only audible sound was the dripping of the water from eaves and battlements. The comparative stillness was singularly depressing.

My last remaining fuel was reduced to a tiny heap of glowing embers, and I knew these would soon be gone—a matter of a half-hour at most. Already the room was shrouded in murky gloom in which visible objects became faint, fantastic outlines.

I saw, or fancied I saw, a slight movement among the draperies of the laird's canopied bed. At the same instant a sound, apparently from a point directly behind me, caused me to whirl like an animal at bay, with every hair on my scalp bristling. It sounded like someone sliding or crawling across the floor, and was obviously *in the chamber;* yet I saw only the paneled wall and the dusty carpet at the point from which the sound emanated.

I tried to pull myself together.

"Must be rats or some other vermin rummaging in the chests," I thought. "Buck up, old boy! Remember, there is no such thing as a——"

My soliloquy was here interrupted by another sound—a sound that chilled the very marrow in my bones. It was distinctly *human* in character, a deep-drawn, sobbing sigh, as of a person just awakened from a bad dream or coming out from under the anesthetic after an operation. I seized the rusted fire-tongs and waited breathlessly for someone or something to appear.

The tongs gave me a feeling of security, and I boldly explored the room, peering behind the tapestries and around and under the furniture. With the firm conviction that I had been suffering from an hallucination brought on by auto-suggestion, I went back to the canvas and unrolled my blanket, being by this time completely exhausted and sadly in need of sleep.

From early boyhood it has been my custom to wind my watch each evening before retiring. Automatically, I twirled the little bur between thumb and forefinger, and glanced at the dial as I did so. It lacked just one minute of eleven. In-

stantly recollections of old Sandy's reference to the hour of eleven flooded my mind. With them came the old feeling of dread, and a persistent, intuitive conviction that I was not alone in the room. I watched the little hand swiftly ticking off the seconds, with bated breath.

Eleven o'clock came and went without incident. I began to breathe more freely at eleven-fifteen, and was about to remove my boots, at the same time chiding myself for my superstitious fear, when it came—a quavering, blood-curdling cry, half moan, half shriek, followed by low, pitiful groans as of someone in extreme pain or anguish. Then I heard the sliding sound again, and loud knocks which seemed to come from the walls and ceiling of the chamber. At the same time my fire went out and I was left in total darkness.

THE feeling that gripped me at that moment is difficult to describe. Those who have suffered from nightmare will know what I mean. Briefly, and as nearly as I can explain it, it is as if one were tightly bound with invisible, unyielding bands of the strength of tempered steel. Added to this there is a sensation of deadly fear, more terrible by far than is experienced when facing a tangible, visible danger.

I seemed rooted to the spot, unable to move even a finger. As the unearthly noises continued it seemed that the invisible bands about my chest tightened until breathing was next to impossible.

I made a supreme effort to break the spell, to move, to cry out. The result was a gurgling, inarticulate sound that I would never have recognized as coming from my own throat, a momentary vision of a thousand scintillating, flashing sparks, and a merciful snapping of the thread of consciousness.

I am certain, as I pen these lines, that there are those who will condemn me for a coward and a fool, but I have resolved to tell no half-truths and to add no embellishments of my own that might serve to play me up as a hero. Comparatively few people have faced the inexplicable alone in the dark; consequently there are but few who can sympathize with me—few who would fully understand the horror of that moment.

To me, there is no fear so terrible as the fear of the unknown. I believe a positive knowledge of immediate death would be mild in comparison to it, and mind you, I had never been superstitious—never admitted, even to myself, the existence of supernatural beings.

The fact that I lay in a cataleptic stupor in that room until dawn possibly saved my life. I am sure that it at least saved my reason.

When I awakened, the roseate glow of dawn from the two windows shed its soft radiance about the room. The fearsome noises had fled with the darkness. I remembered them as one might remember a bad dream. In fact, when I reviewed them in the light of day it seemed unreasonable to suppose that they had been anything more than a dream.

I was chilled to the bone and resolved first to build a fire in the grate, then renew my search for my lost companion. I knew the wood in the courtyard would be too damp for my purpose, so I searched some of the near-by rooms, all of which were provided with fireplaces, and found enough dry fuel.

With the fire kindled and my back to the blaze, I stood planning my next move, when I heard a faint, metallic tapping noise at my right. Startled and mystified by this new development, I listened breathlessly while the sound continued. Then, suddenly, I recognized the Morse

code! Those raps were spelling "A-R-T H-E-L-P, A-R-T H-E-L-P."

In a flash, I realized that Anderson was in distress and trying to communicate with me.

I quickly traced the sounds to the paneled wall at my right.

"Jack!" I shouted. "Where are you, Jack?"

There was a faint, inarticulate whisper. Then the tapping continued. "B-R-E-A-K D-O-W-N T-H-E W-A-L-L," it spelled.

I seized the heavy andiron and swung it against the wall, thinking to smash the panel at a single blow, but discovered, to my surprize, that the panel was of steel, painted to resemble wood.

It was badly rusted, however, and soon gave way, admitting me to a dark chamber in which I found my companion lying in a semi-stupor, more dead than alive. As I bent to pick him up, I stumbled on the bones of a moldy skeleton, and noticed that it lay across a narrow dais on which was stretched a second skeleton at full length.

Without stopping to examine the ghastly contents of that grisly chamber, I carried my chum to where my blanket was spread before the fire.

"Where are you hurt?" I asked.

He answered with great difficulty, in a faint, hoarse whisper.

"Leg's broken—don't know what else. Get me a drink—something hot—and a doctor."

"I'll have some coffee for you in a jiffy," I replied, and seizing the coffee-pot, hurried through the familiar halls and corridors and across the drawbridge to the spring.

After scouring the char from the interior of the pot with a handful of sand and rinsing it thoroughly, I filled it with water and started back, when a familiar rumble greeted my ears, followed by the appearance of Sandy Magruder in his jaunting-cart. He tied the horse to a small sapling and came toward me with a basket on his arm.

"Thought ye might like some fresh eggs for breakfast," he said kindly. "And hoo did ye rest, the nicht?"

I thanked him for the gift, and explained Anderson's predicament. He offered to go to the village for a doctor, and, before leaving, handed me a pint bottle of Johnny Walker.

"Your freend will be needing a nip o' this," he said. "If Doctor MacReady's in, I'll be back within the hour."

As he clattered off down the narrow lane, I turned and hurried back to the bedchamber. After a pull at the flask, Anderson brightened up considerably.

While I was getting breakfast he found his voice and, despite my protest on account of his weakened condition, insisted on telling his story. His broken leg had grown numb, and it did not bother him so much as might be expected.

"When I left you last evening," he began, "I went out in the courtyard for firewood. The sight of the chapel windows, reflecting the rays of the setting sun, reminded me of that part of Sandy Magruder's story which had to do with the disappearance of the coffin from the tomb which was supposed to be near the place of worship. As I knew you had enough fuel to last for a considerable time, and it would not be dark for a half-hour or more, I decided to do a little exploring and, if possible, learn whether the story had any foundation in fact.

"After climbing the shaky turret, I made my way to the chapel and, sure enough, there was the marble tomb of the laird with a beautifully chiseled epi-

taph. I raised the ponderous lid with considerable difficulty, for the brass hinges had corroded and did not turn easily. The tomb was empty, and appeared to be of solid masonry, but I wished to make sure, so I lowered myself inside.

"Scarcely had my feet touched the bottom when the lid closed with a loud bang, the floor opened beneath me, and I shot swiftly down a smooth chute of polished wood. When I reached the bottom, my right leg crumpled under me, my head struck against something hard, and I lost consciousness.

"It must have been some little time before I regained my senses. My head ached, and a sharp pain shot through my leg when I moved, so that I cried out in pain. As I was in total darkness I took out my pocket flashlight and looked about me.

"I was in a small, square room, three sides of which were built of solid masonry. The fourth side was rusted steel, riveted in such a way as to suggest paneling. There was a steel door in the stone wall at my left, which evidently fastened from the other side, for I could not pry it open. A wooden chute curved down beneath it and straightened out to a horizontal position above the floor. On this, a leaden casket rested.

"Evidently both the casket and I had come through that door, which could be pushed open from above, but could not be budged from the inside. What impressed and horrified me most, however, was the proximity of two human skeletons, the smaller lying across the larger, which was stretched on a narrow raised platform.

"I dragged myself to the metal partition, each movement wringing a groan from my lips, and pounded on it at inter-

(Please turn to next page)

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(Continued from page 775)

vals in the hope of attracting your attention. I beat and shouted until my voice sank to a whisper, without avail.

"At length I grew weak from my exertions and numb from the cold, and desisted. It was then that my attention was attracted to a rusty poniard with a jeweled handle, lying beside the coffin. Above it were a number of scratches which looked like writing. I moved closer and read an explanation of the disappearance of the terrible laird's young and beautiful wife, written by her own hand.

"Briefly, it states that on the night of the banquet, her husband summoned her to his room. In his hand was a huge silver goblet from which he commanded her to drink the health of the young minister. Mystified by this strange request, but ever obedient to the command of her lord, she placed the vessel to her lips—then cast it from her in horror. Instead of wine, *it was filled with fresh, warm blood!*

"With a demoniac grin on his face, Sir Malcolm strode to the wall, and reaching under a tapestry, pulled a hidden lever, whereupon a section of paneling slid upward, revealing her former lover lying on a dais with face pale and drawn. His left arm dangled limply over the edge, and the last of his lifeblood dripped from a slash in his wrist to an urn on the floor.

" 'You have drunk a toast to your lover in his own blood,' said her husband. 'Now go and spend the few remaining days you have on earth with his filthy carcass.'

"He gave her a push that sent her headlong into the aperture, and the paneling closed behind her, leaving her in total darkness. She fell in a swoon that lasted for hours. When she regained consciousness, she groped her way about the place, but could find no exit. Upon touching the brow of the young minister she found it cold in death. There were food and wine in the room, placed there by her husband to prolong her agony, but she knew she was doomed eventually to die from starvation.

"It was just as the chapel bell tolled the hour of eleven that she placed the cup of blood to her lips, and each evening when she heard the bell at that hour the memory of it brought on prolonged fits of weeping.

"On the fourth night, she heard the cursing and raving of her husband as on previous nights, and also his instructions to his nephew regarding the disposition of his body. She felt that the hour of her deliverance was at hand, and shrieked with might and main, but instead of bringing the young laird and his retainers to her rescue, she frightened them from the room.

"The next day the coffin, which she knew contained the remains of her fiendish husband, suddenly slid into the room, and as all sounds about the castle were stilled shortly after, she rightly guessed that it had been abandoned.

"With all hope of rescue gone, she took the blood-caked poniard which had slashed the wrist of the martyred young minister, and inscribed her story on the side of the leaden casket. She worked in total darkness, solely by the sense of touch, as the irregularity of the characters will testify, keeping at her task for two days after her food supply was exhausted in order that future generations might know the truth. At the end she emphatically denied any improper relations with the minister, and commended her spirit to her maker."

SANDY arrived in due time with Doctor MacReady, who set my friend's leg, and helped me to convey him to the

cart, in which we took him to the nearest village.

The story of our discovery spread like wild-fire, and for several days we were besieged by newspaper reporters. People journeyed from far and near to sate their morbid curiosity in that chamber of horrors, which I was more than glad to be away from.

A month later we sailed for the United States.

I am writing these lines in the front room of an apartment which Anderson and I have taken in New York City. On the table before me lies a rusty poniard with a gayly jeweled hilt. It has a historic value which far exceeds its intrinsic worth, for through its instrumentality I am able to reveal to the world the ghastly secret of Bludmanton Castle.

Autumn Leaves

By A. LESLIE

They were jade and emerald
When the slanting rays
Of the summer sunlight
Set them all ablaze.

They were all a-murmur
With an elfin tune
When pale winds came leaping
From behind the moon.

Now they flame and smolder
In the winy air,
As if a frightened rainbow
Had spilled its treasures there.

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THE controversy over our covers, which had quieted down, burst into violent eruption again as the result of the science-fiction cover on our April issue, illustrating Arthur William Bernal's story of radio, *The Man Who Was Two Men.* This is the first cover in a blue moon that has not portrayed a more or less nude woman. Some readers, sensing a change in editorial policy, have been quick to attack Mrs. Brundage's cover based on Mr. Bernal's story, demanding a return to the nudes which Mrs. Brundage draws so well. From other readers has risen a halleluiah chorus because we have supposedly banished the nudes for all time from our covers. On the contrary, we have not discarded the nudes, but neither shall we insist on a nude figure on future covers. We have changed our policy only in this respect: the covers must be either weird or dramatic. If the subject matter demands a nude female figure, we will have one on the cover, and it will be drawn with Mrs. Brundage's impeccable good taste; but we will not drag in the nudes just for the sake of nudity.

Our Worst Cover

Edward W. Dew, of Wheeling, West Virginia, writes: "For the past three years I have been buying WEIRD TALES and reading it with much enjoyment, and so far I have never had any kick to register. But now I want to join the cover controversy and register a kick against the April cover. It is a great disappointment to me to see that the series of semi-nudes of M. Brundage have finally deteriorated to mere science-fiction illustrations of inanimate machines and crazy scientists. If this cover is an experiment, and I hope it is, I for one think that it is a backward step for your publication and I sincerely hope that the consensus of the other WEIRD TALES fans will bear me out. I have no objection to the science-fiction type of story, and I thought *Rulers of the Future* was a very fine story. However, one of the points that distinguished WEIRD TALES from other magazines was the fine covers, and now that is missing."

Comic Valentine Cover

J. Wellington, of Mount Vernon, Illinois, writes: "Your April cover was the worst I have ever seen on WT—it is childish, ridiculous, even comical. It reminds me of nothing more than Professor Wotasnozzle of comic strip fame at work on one of his inventions. If we can't have Mrs. Brundage's weird nudes, then have Hugh Rankin depict some of his monsters for your covers —I recall the hideous *Dunwich Horror* as he drew it as well as I recall it from Lovecraft's description. His monster of *The Valley of the Worm* was also excellent, as is his illustration of Mrs. Heald's *Out of the Eons* in the new issue. Give us Brundage nudes or Rankin monsters—and no more comic valentine covers. . . . Now, for the future: dish out science-fiction in small, far-apart portions, omit detective stories completely, and give us more horror, ghosts, vampires, werewolves, elementals, etc."

Like a Lovecraft Masterpiece

John Malone, of Jackson, Mississippi, writes: "How does Hazel Heald do it? *Out of the Eons* was like a masterpiece by H. P. Lovecraft. Hardly any of the horror was pictured, most of it was suggested, until the climax, when the revelation came! . . . *The Man Who Was Two Men* was pretty humorous; in fact, it was the first humorous tale

I have ever read in WEIRD TALES. I mean out-and-out humorous. I had many a chuckle while I was gloating hideously over Preest's dilemma. That story was certainly good!"

Caligula's Death

Robert B. Baldwin, of Lawrenceville, New Jersey, writes: "Having read but one story so far in the April issue of WEIRD TALES, I am writing in to question the description of the Emperor Caligula's death in Eando Binder's *Shadows of Blood*. According to this highly entertaining narrative, Caligula was assassinated in one of his villas; in a torture chamber, to be exact. But doesn't history teach us that the conspirators, chief among whom were Cassius Chaerea, Bubo, Asprenas, Vinicius, Cornelius Sabinus ('The Tiger'), murdered their mad monarch outside, at midday? Shouldn't we be just a little more accurate about historic detail? This being my initial communication to WEIRD TALES, I shall say now that *Shambleau* still represents to me the height of the unearthly and truly weird. As a general rule, however, Robert Evans Howard's stories are perhaps your best; I have come almost to know Conan as a personal friend, and to admire him as a personal hero." [Writers of historical fiction often take liberties with historical facts; just as Robert E. Howard took liberties with the facts about Tamerlane's death in one of his greatest stories, *Lord of Samarcand* (published in ORIENTAL STORIES). But Mr. Howard, in spite of a version of Tamerlane's death which ran counter to the known facts, was true to the historic picture. Robert Graves uses much fictional material in *I, Claudius* and in *Claudius the God*, but he keeps his narrative true to the picture of the times. So Eando Binder's account of Caligula's death, though incorrect in detail, is true to the historic picture. In *I, Claudius*, Caligula was murdered as he was leaving the theater.—THE EDITOR.]

Mrs. Brundage's Nudes

Alden Moras, of Long Beach, California, writes: "I am sorry to see that you have abandoned nudes on the cover. Mrs. Brundage's treatment of the nudes is irreproachable; in fact, the cover is one of the things

(Please turn to next page)

NEXT MONTH

JIREL MEETS MAGIC

By C. L. Moore

LESS than two years ago a story called "Shambleau" was printed in WEIRD TALES—a story that made literary history, for it was one of the strangest stories ever printed, and its author, C. L. Moore, had never been heard of before. But "Shambleau" was so unusual, its author wrote with such distinction and fascinating charm, that the name of C. L. Moore was inscribed in the top notch of weird-story writers, and "Shambleau" was acclaimed a veritable *tour de force* of literature.

SINCE then the author has stepped from triumph to triumph. We take real pleasure in announcing a new novelette by C. L. Moore, "Jirel Meets Magic," built around that strange and intriguing character, Jirel of Joiry, the red-headed warrior maid who was the heroine of "Black God's Kiss." The tale of this tremendous adventure is in many ways the most unusual and most powerful story that this author has yet written. It will be published complete in the July issue of

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(Continued from page 779)

I wait for anxiously. Her nudes are never sexy or lascivious, as is the case in so many magazines. Though they may be out of proportion occasionally, they are always in good taste."

Keep the Cover Weird

Carroll F. Wales, of Denmark, Maine, writes: "Just a few words about the April issue. I agree with you when you say that *The Man Who Was Two Men* by A. W. Bernal is the most entertaining story about radio ever written. The other stories were also very good. I can't seem to get enough of Clark Ashton Smith. Usually when an author writes a story every month his work gets tiresome, but not Smith's. Please always print a goodly number of short short stories. I especially enjoyed reading these. . . . Brundage is one of the best cover artists I have ever seen. The nude human body (if a good specimen) has always been to my mind something to admire rather than to cover up or hide shamefully. And I certainly cannot agree with some of my fellow readers when they say that our WT covers are becoming sexy; though I do say keep the covers *weird,* no matter what is on them."

A New Reader

Dr. David L. Dorfman, of New York City, writes: "I am a newcomer to your circle of readers, having just finished my first copy (April) of WEIRD TALES, and I am anxious to offer my comments. I found the assortment of stories in this issue quite interesting but was particularly attracted and most absorbed in *The Hand of the O'Mecca* by Howard Wandrei. His theme is fascinating and his style clear and forceful. As for his descriptions, they were so alive and lucid that I was mentally transported to the scene of the story and felt that I was with Elof Bocak all through, sharing his every move and experience with him. I am now anxiously looking forward to the next issue of WEIRD TALES and hope to find more stories written in the Wandrei manner. My hat off to you, Mr. Wandrei! Let me add that I do not believe much would have been lost by the omission of *The Man Who Was Two Men.* The plot seems vaguely familiar and the story a bit too wordy. Perhaps, in more concise form it would have held more interest."

Reprint Lovecraft's Stories

Donald A. Wollheim, of New York City, writes: "Why not reprint all of Lovecraft's earlier works? I am sure that your readers would appreciate them greatly; *Hypnos,* for instance, and *The Moon Bog,* and the others. I agree with Paul Brown who bemoans the loss of some of your eery atmosphere. By all means employ Hugh Rankin more. He is the one artist able to depict the undepictable. See his illustrations to *The Lurking Fear, The Space-Eaters,* the *Dunwich Horror,* for examples—those dim, half-seen horrors beyond form or cognizance. No one else seems to be able to do that. Rankin apparently has a patent on it."

Death of Arlton Eadie

As this issue goes to press, we are saddened by the news from England of the death of Arlton Eadie at his home in Sussex on March 20. Mr. Eadie, since his work first appeared in WEIRD TALES early in 1928, has made himself very popular with our readers. More than twenty stories from his pen have been published in this magazine, and he was rapidly becoming one of the most popular writers of mystery fiction, both in the United States and in his native England. We had just accepted from him an intriguing weird mystery novel, entitled *The Carnival of Death,* when we received the sad tidings of his death. This novel will now be published posthumously in WEIRD TALES.

Out of the Eons

Lewis F. Torrance, of Winfield, Kansas, writes: "*Out of the Eons* was the most remarkable, the best, greatest, et al, narrative it has ever been my good fortune to read in WEIRD TALES. It seems to have that indefinable something that science-fiction has been lacking. Yours for more Hazel Heald."

Shadows of Blood

Luther A. Cloud, of Newark, New Jersey, writes: "Your magazine is the best of its kind I have ever read. I have gotten several of my friends to read it and they are as interested as I. Your interior artists are very good, and now that Brundage shows on this month's cover that she can make the

covers interesting without the use of nudes, please cut the nudes out. Let's have more stories about Doctor de Grandin. His adventures are always good. And please, more stories like *Shadows of Blood* and that very good reprint, *The Canal*. My favorite story in this issue was *Shadows of Blood*."

Bring Back the Nudes

Earl Johnson, of Beckley, West Virginia, writes: "After one look at the cover illustration on your April issue I suggest you get a few pictures of Buck Rogers funny papers from the children and run them on your covers. For heaven's sake put back the high-class nudes you have had before. Nobody objects to them except a few soreheads. Now a few words about your stories. You have the one and only magazine with real honest to goodness weird tales and yet you run a steady diet of detective and rocket-ship stories that are slowly driving your old friends away from you. Keep WEIRD TALES wholly *weird*, as we can get all the rocket-ship stories we want elsewhere, and unless

(Please turn to next page)

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(Continued from page 781)

you start in again on good covers cut me off your list."

Orchids for Frailey

Julius Hopkins, of Washington, D. C., writes: "Although I have not yet read all of the stories in the April WT, I have decided on my selection for first place. I pick *The Man Who Could Not Go Home* by L. E. Frailey. This is one of the finest little stories I have ever read and it certainly deserves to be mentioned among the best stories ever published in WT. This story is full of human feeling, which is so well expressed, and its two startling climaxes make it a short masterpiece."

Robert Nelson's Poetry

Rudolph Dahlin, of Geneva, Illinois, writes: "In the six years during which I have read WT I developed an opinion that the poetry of Clark Ashton Smith could not be surpassed. I still think that his poetry is excellent, but I find his equal in the poetry of Robert Nelson. Surely such poems as *Sable Revelry* and *Dream-Stair* will not go unappreciated by the readers of WT. They are incomparable."

Science-Fiction in WT

LeRoy Christian Bashore, of Lebanon, Pennsylvania, writes: "I am a scientifictionist, and I read WEIRD TALES because it contains both excellent scientific stories and weird stories. Many scientific stories appear in WT quite frequently, such as *Rulers of the Future* and *The Man Who Was Two Men*. . . . We scientifictionists grow a little tired of just reading science-fiction stories all of the time. WEIRD TALES solves our problems and eases our minds because it contains a mixture of weird and science-fiction stories. WT is just the thing, and it always satisfies me—a nice little magazine with smooth-cut edges, containing excellent stories by worthy authors. What more do we want? The April issue was perfect. The scientific painting cover by Mrs. Brundage is a beauty. *The Man Who Was Two Men*, by Arthur William Bernal, is the best story in this issue. *The Last Hieroglyph*, by Clark Ashton Smith, takes second place. I have only found one fault with WEIRD TALES, and I offer the following suggestion:—enlarge the Eyrie! Everything else is just right with the magazine, and it has just the right amount of 'salt'."

In Praise of Mrs. Heald

B. M. Reynolds, of North Adams, Massachusetts, writes: "The April issue was a treat. I cannot say enough in praise of the work of Hazel Heald. She is veritably a female Lovecraft. Her *Out of the Eons* is a masterpiece. . . . I almost expected that Mr. Lovecraft himself would stroll into the museum and take a hand at deciphering the hieroglyphs on the scroll and cylinder. Let's have more like this from Mrs. Heald. Second place, unquestionably, goes to Clark Ashton Smith for *The Last Hieroglyph*—a great piece of imaginative fiction by a great master. If you continue to print classics such as these, you will surely make literary history. I have just one kick to register. I have noticed of late that detectives are slowly but surely beginning to find their way into your pages. This is not consistent with your policy, and cheap detective fiction is all too numerous on the news stands. Please keep detectives out of WEIRD TALES and keep WEIRD TALES weird."

A Seabury Quinn Admirer

Edward C. Davis, of Knoxville, Iowa, writes: "May I once again say that you are indeed fortunate in having such a writer as Seabury Quinn? He is the best of all your writers, to my mind. . . . Your magazine surpasses all others, and I like all the stories except those about distant worlds. Please give us more of the shuddery type of stories. Long live WEIRD TALES!"

Then and Now

Donald Allgeier, of Springfield, Missouri, writes: "I'm a busy college student, so I usually don't finish one WT until another one is out, but I always read it from cover to cover. . . . Your very short stories are a unique feature of the magazine. I suggest that you have a contest and give prizes for the best stories which fall in this class. New authors may be found in this manner. Your April issue is practically an all-star number. Every story is good. . . . A comparison of the first issue of WT I ever bought with the present issue is really not a

comparison, but a contrast. Congratulations on your great improvement."

More Conan Stories

Annabelle Lantz, of Chicago, writes: "I have been a constant reader of your magazine for two and one-half years and have never been able to make one serious criticism about it. I would have started reading this magazine earlier but I am just fourteen years old. My favorite stories this month are *Shadows of Blood, The Last Hieroglyph* and *The Aztec Ring.* My one request is that we have more Conan stories. I never tire of them." [You'll have them.—THE EDITOR.]

Hard to Decide

Thomas S. Gardner, of Johnson City, Tennessee, writes: "The April issue of WT was very good. I thought that *The Hand of the O'Mecca* was the best vampire story in a long time. I remember *The Canal,* your reprint story, from long ago. It was well worth rereading. *The Aztec Ring* was very good of its type. In fact, I liked all the stories so much that it is hard to say which is the best."

Pithy Comments

M. G. Crider, of St. Louis, writes: "If a weird tale was ever told, L. E. Frailey's story in the April issue, *The Man Who Could Not Go Home,* certainly did the telling. I like his easy, yet to the point, story-telling style, and look forward to more of his stories in your magazine."

William Laffler, of Monroe, Louisiana, writes: "Keep up the good work. *The Trail of the Cloven Hoof* by Arlton Eadie rates equal with *Dracula.*"

Richard Martin writes from Cambridge, Massachusetts: "I found *Out of the Eons* by Hazel Heald the best story in the April issue. The reference to Widener Library was very amusing to me, as I have often wondered myself as I passed by it if there is a *Necronomicon* within. It is surely a formidable enough place to have one."

Winifred L. Houston, of Oakland, California, writes: "*The Man Who Was Two Men,* by Arthur William Bernal, is very interesting and not too gruesome, and certainly up to date."

Dwight A. Boyce, of Ludlow, Massachu-

(Please turn to next page)

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(Continued from page 783)

setts, writes: "The Brundage cover is an improvement over the procession of chorus gals, but why not leave science to the magazines that specialize in that sort of thing, and stick to the weird?"

Don Sawtelle, of Erie, Pennsylvania, writes: "*The Canal* by Everil Worrell, your April reprint, is the best vampire story I have ever read."

L. Finn Norman, of Hot Springs, Arkansas, writes: "My favorite writer is Robert E. Howard—more power to him! My favorite character is Conan the Cimmerian."

Based on Fact?

Charles H. Bert, of Philadelphia, writes: "I was glad to reread *The Canal* by Everil Worrell. It is the best vampire story ever to appear in WEIRD TALES, and after seven years it still can't be beaten. It is totally different from all others of the same type. . . . I would like to mention an unknown fact about *The Outsider* by H. P. Lovecraft. It may interest the editor and readers to know that this story is based upon cold fact! Yes, cold fact! While most readers consider *The Outsider* the finest piece of literature to appear in the pages of WEIRD TALES, have they ever thought it was possible? Very few have. But have you ever heard of the 'Mystery Child of Europe', Kaspar Hauser? For eighteen years Kaspar Hauser was in solitary confinement, and never saw the light of day until he came to this age. You see, he was abducted when he was a small child, and placed in solitary confinement, in a dark room, for eighteen years. He escaped accidentally and was found wandering near Anspach, Bavaria, seemingly from nowhere. What must have been his thoughts of the outside world during his incarceration! Strange, indeed, they must have been. How had he acted when he saw the light of day? Lovecraft's character in *The Outsider* is amazingly similar to Kaspar Hauser. Perhaps Lovecraft is familiar with the tragic history of Hauser. Judging from his works, Lovecraft must be a scholarly person. So, *The Outsider*, the wildest flight of imaginative fancy ever written, surpassing the best of Poe's, is fact! Truth is stranger than fiction, you know. I'm ending this letter with a plea for the return to your pages of that incomparable little man: Jules de Grandin."

Your Favorite Story

Readers, what story do you like best in this issue? Write a letter to the Eyrie, or fill out the coupon on this page and send it to WEIRD TALES. The most popular story in the April WEIRD TALES, as shown by your votes and letters, was *Out of the Eons* by Hazel Heald. Your second choice was *The Man Who Was Two Men* by Arthur William Bernal.

MY FAVORITE STORIES IN THE JUNE WEIRD TALES ARE:

Story	Remarks
(1) ----------	----------
(2) ----------	----------
(3) ----------	----------

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W. T.—8

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Because of the many requests for back issues of WEIRD TALES, the publishers do their best to keep a sufficient supply on hand to meet all demands. This magazine was established early in 1923 and there has been a steady drain on the supply of back copies ever since. At present, we have the following back numbers on hand for sale:

1928	1929	1931	1932	1933	1934	1935
----	Jan.	Jan.	Jan.	Jan.	Jan.	Jan.
----	----	Feb.-Mar.	Feb.	Feb.	Feb.	Feb.
Mar.	Mar.		----	Mar.	Mar.	Mar.
----	----	Apr.-May	Apr.	Apr.	Apr.	Apr.
----	----		----	May	May	May
----	June	June-July	June	June	June	----
July	----		July	July	July	----
Aug.	----	----	Aug.	Aug.	Aug.	----
----	----	----	Sept.	Sept.	Sept.	----
Oct.	----	Oct.	Oct.	Oct.	Oct.	----
Nov.	----	Nov.	Nov.	Nov.	Nov.	----
Dec.	----	----	Dec.	Dec.	Dec.	----

These back numbers contain many fascinating stories. If you are interested in obtaining any of the back copies on this list please hurry your order because we can not guarantee that the list will be as complete as it now is within the next 30 days. The price on all back issues is 25c per copy. Mail all orders to:

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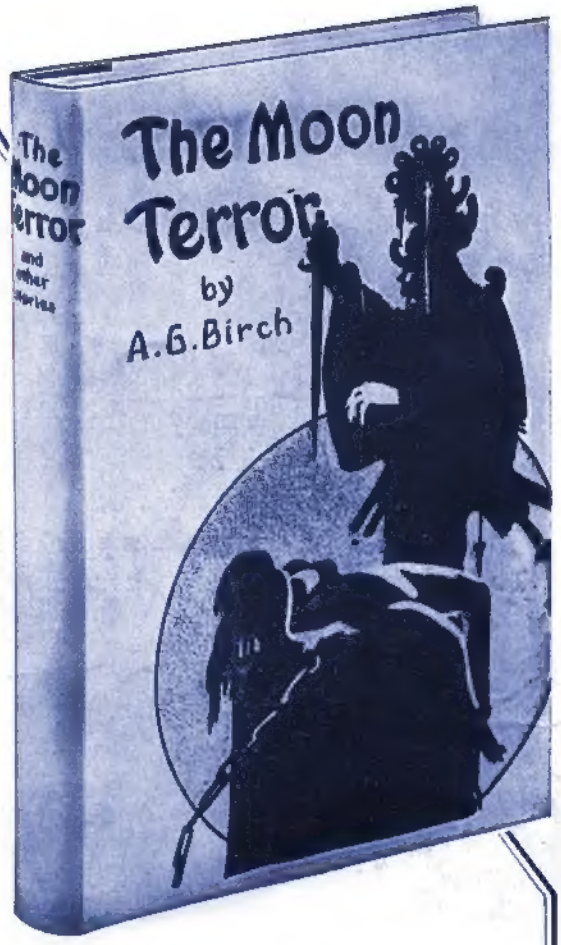

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WE HAVE had many requests asking us to reprint THE MOON TERROR in the magazine. This popular story appeared as a serial in WEIRD TALES in 1923, and is too long to republish in the magazine consistent with our policy. To fulfill the wishes of many readers who have not had the opportunity to read this story, we have had it printed in book form and offer a copy free with each six months' subscription to WEIRD TALES.

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